

To the Budding Creative Writer
A Handbook

Roselyne M. Jua and Bate Besong

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The writer may not want to concern himself with society,
but society concerns itself with him.

Harry Slochower

You can't do it with sweet sonneteering.

Es'kia Mphahlele

We must take over all the fine things in our literary and
artistic heritage, critically assimilate whatever is beneficial,
and use them as examples when we create works out of the
literary and artistic raw materials in the life of the people
of our own time and place.

Mao Tse-tung

The writer ignores reality at his own peril.

Wole Soyinka

BB, be not disgraced.¹ Let the muse in each emerge.

1. Bate Besong, fondly called BB, with whom I was co-authoring this book would die in a ghastly motor accident, in the early morning hours of March 8, 2007 after the resoundingly successful launch of his last collection of poems entitled *Disgrace* the previous day. Asked to comment on his book, the *polyphemus detainee* cryptically and uncharacteristically declared in as few words as possible, “*Disgrace* on Bate Besong by Bate Besong.”

Acknowledgments

This handbook exists in large part because of the small group of students at the University of Buea, Cameroon, in 2002 that kept pestering Bate Besong and me to read their poems, short stories or drama sketches. This led to the creation of *The Writer's Circle*. The question sessions during our meetings in turn provoked the idea of a handbook on writing. The University of Buea Staff Development Fund provided us seed money to initiate the project.

We acknowledge the inspiration of all writers from whom we have learned and continue to learn so much. Throughout, we have relied for examples on other works and would like to acknowledge use of Christopher Okigbo's "Elegy for Alto" and "Thunder Can Break;" Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, Wole Soyinka's "Death in the Dawn" and *Death and the King's Horseman*; Leopold Sedar Senghor's "Long Long you have held between your hands;" Agostinho Neto's *Sacred Hope*; Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*; Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*; Leopold Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*; Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Kole Omotoso's *The Curse A One Act Play*. We would like to extend special thanks for permission from the following to reproduce either wholly or in part their essays and plays: Ngugi wa Thiong'o for "The Writer in a Changing Society;" Ayi Kwei Armah for "The Teaching of Creative Writing" and Bole Butake for *The Rape of Michelle*.

Ms. Magdalene Joso Mbella, my secretary, is due thanks for her clerical assistance.

Roselyne M. Jua

Foreword

The very act of writing is one of manipulation. Each writer seeks to convince her audience of the authenticity and propriety of the written word. How many times have you read a good book and exclaimed, “Yeah! That’s exactly my story. I was thinking the same thing!” Yes, you may have been thinking the same thing, but the difference between you and the published author is the fact that she has deigned to put her thoughts on paper. She has come out of the closet, exposing her innermost thoughts to a sometimes unapprehending public.

How do you move from point A to point B, from simply thinking to actually writing? This is a question that has concerned writers since time immemorial and John Gardi put it succinctly in the *Saturday Review* when he stated:

The truly creative- whether in art, in science, or in philosophy- is always and precisely that which cannot be taught. And yet, though it seems paradoxical, creativity cannot spring from the untaught. Creativity is the imaginatively gifted recombination of old elements into new. And so, it may be seen that there is no real paradox. The elements of an invention or of a creation can be taught; but the creativity must be self-discovered and self-disciplined.¹

Any teacher of a freshman composition class will tell you that getting started is one of the most difficult things a writer faces. But one of the first things a student in a freshman comp class is advised to do is to determine the

1. See John Haney, *The Good Mind* by Edgar Dale. May 16, 2009.
<http://www.webhaney.com/good-mind-edgar-dale>

purpose of her work and the audience. She is then advised to simply start and keep on writing and re-writing until her subject comes through. On the other hand, a disciple of Edgar Allan Poe would tell you that it is necessary to determine what effect you want to produce even before you start to write. What seems acceptable is the belief that there are as many approaches to writing as there are writers and stories, regardless of whether these are conveyed through drama, prose or poetry. Each writer will choose whichever mode of expression she thinks well depicts the subject under consideration. The prevailing objective should, however, be that you remain true to yourself.

Over time, there have emerged two schools of thought: those who advocate art for art's sake, and those who say that art must have a social commitment. In other words, writers and critics have continued to propound partially or wholly the 14C idea that art must either be *dulce* and/or *utile*. Whether you ascribe to one school of thought or both as the case may be, language has not only always enthralled us, it has been at the centre of things. *The Holy Bible* begins, "In the beginning was the word and the word was God." Language is therefore a gift from God and the Holy Bible itself is our first source not only of knowledge but of how to use words and use them effectively as borne out by the many writers like William Shakespeare and Walt Whitman who have sought reliance and inspiration from that same Bible. Confucius himself also postulates that the secret of power lies in one's ability to control or use language. So whether the objective of the writer is to entertain or to educate, it is clear that the writer/artist thinks she has a unique perspective on her surroundings and is desperate to make some contact with the common man for as Sankie Maimo suggests in "Promoting the True Spirit of Creativity and Cultivating an Art," "the artist, in the final analysis is not a medium but also, in fact, [...] a catalyst" (11). The

language she employs as she reaches out in her attempt to be understood will determine her level of success to communicate instantly with her audience anywhere. This is probably truer of theatre than the other art forms, which is not to say that this is not obtainable as far as they are concerned; the operative word here is “instantly.”

The written word is magical; it ensures that a thought lives forever or leaves footprints in the sands of time as the adage goes. The hieroglyphics recount the devastating life of a people. In them we perceive the civilization of Egypt, its doom and its demise recorded for all time. A famished people, the written word ensured that the sentiment became a reality.

The writer's work is the mirror she holds up to the world. The question she poses is twofold: not only, “Do you like what you see?” but, “Do you understand what you see?” And sometimes when art imitates life too closely, the government is not only embarrassed but discomfited. This may account for the perception governments tend to have that artists, especially dramaturges, are anti-establishment even though, as I have claimed elsewhere,² states and governments have in a paradoxical manner been known to make use of art when and where it served them. The stage is the writer's and or dramatists' listening post which she uses to depict a highly concentrated and ever more complex society. Theatre has always been a medium for public debate, central to the people's lives, for as the Greeks held the people would starve without it.

All art forms, written and unwritten, however, primarily seek to communicate. The invention of the telephone revolutionized how individuals in society interact, and Guglielmo Marconi the radio broadcaster of 1901 acknowledged that the radio thrust man into a whole new

2. See Roselyne M. Jua, ed. Introduction, *The Tragedy of Mr. No-Balance* by Victor E. Musinga. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Publishers, 2008.

world of communication. Theatre like radio can transform politics and society. As with facial features, to understand the sentiment, you need not speak the words. The adage that a picture is worth a thousand words could not be truer. Imagine then to what levels television and its instant replay of live events from the farthest parts of the world have transported us! Any art form then ensures the survival of our historical compass.

The idea for this handbook on creative writing was sown during one of the many meetings Bate Besong and I held with the students of *The Writer's Circle* at the University of Buea, Cameroon. During these discussions we gradually began to understand that whereas critics in Anglophone Cameroon have consistently focused on the paucity of creative writing, we needed to move from such negativism and engage in a more positive approach. Simplistically, we questioned why? What indeed were some of the factors responsible for this state of affairs? How could the situation be redressed and how best could we connect with a much wider creative field? Obviously, we could not be expected to answer all these questions to the satisfaction of everyone. But the *Circle* we believe would begin to address some of the areas of concern. Like all nascent ideas run by overworked academicians, the Circle's life has been threatened by time, which Ben Jonson so famously referred to as the harbinger of death. We are glad to say that it may only be a stupor and hope that this handbook will attempt to answer some of the questions our budding writers posed. And that as they read they will keep Aristotle's precept, that most art is imitation, in mind.

So, rather than appending concepts in an abstract manner, we have consciously sought to teach by example, culling from well-read African writers. It is our hope that by actually illustrating what exactly we mean at any one point by alluding not only to one but several authors, we have facilitated the

process. The choice of African writers is deliberate on our part since we believe our students, like this present group in the *Circle*, are more grounded in African literature. However, because the general principles are applicable across the board for all literatures we hope that even though the examples are culled from specific African writers, any aspiring writer will ultimately find this handbook both informing and useful. Also, while keeping in mind T.S. Eliot's exhortation that "tradition should be positively discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand and novelty is better than repetition" (1), we have not sought to propound tenets of any tradition, convinced that to do so would be to stifle the imagination and creativity.

The handbook is divided into three sections, focusing on poetry, prose and drama. At the beginning of each section we offer a general introduction and analyze objectives while investigating stylistic devices and key concepts. Only then do we proceed to a sampling of representative works from writers like Christopher Okigbo, Mariama Bâ, and Wole Soyinka for purposes of appreciation. This is followed by a brief conclusion which echoes and summarizes some of the objectives and goals we set out with at the beginning. The last section of the handbook is dedicated to essays on writing by Ayi Kwei Armah, Bate Besong and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Their inclusion, we believe, can only reinforce some of the precepts and guidelines we have sought to emphasize throughout so that whether or not these emotions are as spontaneous as acknowledged by the 19C bard William Wordsworth (448 & 460), they are most certainly recollected in tranquillity and demonstrate the imagination at work.

Roselyne M. Jua

Section One

Guidepost on the Art of Writing Poetry

Preface

There is no one, who at some point in life does not feel the urge to write a poem. Every human being therefore needs an outlet for any inborn creative talent.

What is remarkable, however, about modern poetry from Africa is that although it deals with serious ideas about the human condition and historical experience, it still provides the reader with pleasant pictures of the setting and creates fun by the way literary devices are used.

Categories of poetry include the lyrical, narrative, satirical, allegorical, humorous, trivial, descriptive etc. There are poems with restricted and universal appeal. There are poems in which the reader is also presented with the characters in conversation with each other through which they reveal their level of maturity, their reactions to various ideas and incidents and their relationships to other characters.

Aims of Poetry

The aims of Poetry in general are two-fold:

- a) to enjoy or appreciate the manner in which the poem expresses the human predicament, or human condition.
- b) to enrich the reader's stock of knowledge and experience through understanding what the poem expresses.

Literary devices are therefore employed in poems to help the poet clarify the idea he is expressing and to deepen the reader's understanding of it. Personification, as we know, is a figure of speech, which gives to inanimate objects or abstract

ideas the qualities and functions of a human being. Its function, when used in a successful poem, is to create a mental picture for the reader of the subject or idea being talked about, so that he can see clearly in his mind and understand fully.

Some Obstacles to Writing Successful Poetry

How metaphors, similes, personification and oxymoron, for example, are employed by the poet for painting pictures of what he expresses in the poem *is* the central goal of the art of writing poetry. A successful poem should possess metaphorical expressions, which help the reader to understand the ideas the poet is expressing and which the audience enjoys because they create beautiful pictures in his mind. Pleonasm can destroy the fluency of lines and slow down the process of communication.

Experience does however show that most established and aspiring Cameroonian “poets” come into the field with little or no background. However, even to an intrinsic examination of a work, one must bring some knowledge from outside the text. One’s general background of information, informal knowledge of customs and traditions, i.e. oral literature, knowledge acquired through college or university courses in such subjects as journalism and history or through independent reading, one’s understanding of literary terms or of allusions – all these represent a capital fund from which one can draw to enrich one’s creative writing.

Even though we all agree with Wordsworth’s adage that poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of emotions recollected in tranquillity,” experience equally reveals that even seasoned writers have continued and continue over time to re-work, edit and revise their work to effectively achieve a refreshingly fresh focus. For as Ayi Kwei Armah suggests in the essay appended to this volume, the “root of inspiration isn’t luck or the accident of birth. It’s work – stubborn, systematic work. And far from coming from the sky, inspiration comes from deep within the well-stocked human mind itself.”

Synopsis for the Aspiring Poet

- (i) Since the objective of creative writing is self-expression, you may ask yourself why the poet is expected to paint many pictures in words in his poem: The answer is that he wants the reader to see the ideas he is putting across with the eyes of our imagination, so that we may understand them better, and also he wants us to enjoy the sight of those pictures.
- (ii) The poet should say something significant in each of his poems, and should say it in a way that is meant to give the reader or audience some pleasure.
- (iii) Your reader should derive special joy from your use of ordinary words in extraordinary ways.
- (iv) Your poem is said to be successful in *what it says* and in the *way it says it*.
- (v) It is the way you have transfigured words and made them mean a lot more than they do in their everyday use that makes you successful in the art of writing poetry.
- (vi) In order to create a feeling of awe and to arouse imagination fully, you may explore the technique of *surrealism* (i.e. beyond realism) to set your poem outside our normal experience. However, since the world you are presenting is outside reality, to give your work concreteness, you must remember that the world of your poem is within reality. Your poem would, therefore, be said to be successful, in
 - a) What the poem says
 - b) The way it says it

In that way you will not only make your reader wiser with the knowledge about the human predicament, but you also would have entertained him by the way you have communicated this knowledge to him.

We can thus say that your poem communicates to us a very important truth about life, and that it does so in a manner that gives us pleasure.

(vii) You must always remember that the objective of writing poetry is for self-expression. You should therefore approach your subject matter with mature interest and confidence in the art of poetic composition. Only then would you lend to your poetry the robustness and gusto necessary to accomplish your objective.

Modern African Poets of Exceptional Eloquence

General Introduction

Creative writing that is effective often demonstrates the author's masterful use of language, his appropriation of the most effective words, the organization of these in the proper sentence structures and the judicious relation of those lines or sentences to evoke the proper nuances of thoughts and feelings of the reader.

Even if the aspiring poet provides some excellent images and sounds to support his poem and organizes his effort logically, he may still mar his art by stylistic lapses. And, although a reader may be able to derive the poet's meaning, he will definitely be irritated by the poet's carelessness and by the need to cut through verbiage.

Strictly speaking, one cannot therefore present ideas effectively in a poem unless one expresses them clearly. Exception must however be made for poets who deliberately set out to be obscurantist which is the trend in the writings of some poets like Christopher Okigbo and Bate Besong. Communication between the poet and his readers is of the

utmost importance. If at any time there is a breakdown or the process is impeded, the poet is in effect defeating his main purpose of writing, which is to explain his ideas and the details he chooses to support them.

(i) The example of Christopher Okigbo's "Elegy for Alto"

With drum accompaniment

The poetry of the Nigerian Okigbo reflects his classical training and by and large influences the perception that he is deliberately obscure as we have just noted above. This nonetheless emphasizes the importance of all learning and how it can impinge on one's life. We see in the following how effectively Okigbo uses imagery to ground his work in the African political scenery; the recurrent echo of "politicians", "eagles" and "robbers" throughout the poem draws an immediate association between all three and makes it possible for him to assert ever so firmly that present day African leaders are robbing the common man just as the colonial masters had the colonized.

AND THE HORN may now paw the air howling
goodbye...

For the Eagles are now in sight:
Shadows in the horizon –

THE ROBBERS are here in black sudden steps of
showers, of caterpillars –

THE EAGLES have come again,
The eagles rain down on us –

POLITICIANS are back in giant hidden steps of
howitzers, of detonators –

THE EAGLES descend on us,
Bayonets and cannons –

THE ROBBERS descend on us to strip us of our
laughter, of our thunder –

THE EAGLES have chosen their game,
Taken our concubines –

POLITICIANS are here in this iron dance of mortars, of
generators –

THE EAGLES are suddenly there,
New stars of iron dawn:

So let the horn paw the air howling goodbye...

O mother mother Earth, unbind me; let this be
my last testament; let this be
The ram's hidden wish to the sword the sword's
Secret prayer to the scabbard –

THE ROBBERS are back in black hidden steps of
detonators. (*Labyrinths*, 1971 71-72)

Christopher Okigbo's style of writing poetry is what marks him out as one of Africa's leading poets of the second half of the twentieth century. He uses the English language in a new and exciting way, not associated with any African poet before him. He does this through the skilful incorporation of Igbo proverbs, songs, sayings, riddles, aphorisms, and wisecracks in his writings.

It can be said today that this literary technique, which many contemporary African poets now freely adopt, owes its origin to Christopher Okigbo's *Paths of Thunder: Poems Prophesying War*

Fanfare of drums, wooden bells: iron chapter;
And our dividing airs are gathered home.

This day belongs to a miracle of thunder;
Iron has carried the forum
With token gestures. Thunder has spoken,
Left no signatures: broken

Barbicans alone tell one tale the winds scatter.

Mountain or tower in sight, lo, your hostages –
Iron has made, alas – masterpieces –
Statuettes of legendary heroes – iron birds
Held – fruit of flight – tight;

For barricaded in iron handiwork a miracle caged.

Bring them out we say, bring them out
Faces and hands and feet,
The stories behind the myth, the plot
Which the ritual enacts.

Thunder can break – Earth, bind me fast –
Obduracy, the disease of elephants.

 ("Thunder Can Break" from
 Paths of Thunder: Poems
 Prophesying War, 63.)

Christopher Okigbo is a master craftsman among modern African poets. He will long be remembered for his unique use of language, his concentration on the devices of sound, his wonderful use of rhythm and musical quality (euphony), and his exciting reconstruction of events in Nigerian and African history in a way that has brought out fully the glory and dignity of modern African literature.

(ii) The Example of Okot p'Bitek

Pio Zirimu and Ngugi wa Thiong'o coined the term *orature* to denote stories, poems, plays etc. in oral form that African writers can learn from as Ngugi in particular has acknowledged.¹ *Orature* therefore is the incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, aesthetics and achievements of traditional African thought and imaginations. Its simple eloquence has exercised great influence on the style of modern African poetry. Successful African poets like Okot p'Bitek draw their sustenance from *orature*.

The Ugandan writer, Okot p'Bitek, first achieved fame with an English version of his critical realist poem *Song of Lawino* which has become the chosen model for a whole school of writing. It has inspired Okello Oculi's *The Orphan*, Joseph Buruga's *The Abandoned Hut*, Fale Wache's *Lament of a Mother* and p'Bitek himself has followed this up with *Song of Ocol*, *Song of Malaya* and *Song of Prisoner*.

In *Song of Lawino*, Okot p'Bitek utilizes the multi-faceted and multifarious resources of *orature* especially *lament* and *dirge*, transforming this into simple poetic eloquence that has exercised great influence on the style of modern African poetry as the following excerpts demonstrate:

My husband quarrels bitterly
He says
I do not know hygiene
And I do not know
How to look after the sick.
He says
I do not know
The use of quinine,
And I have not been taught
How to prevent diseases.

1. See Kwesi Owusu, (1986) *A Political Choice*. In *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*. 234-235.

My man is ashamed of me
Because my father
Was a well-known diviner-priest;
He says
He is sick of my superstitions and fears. (91)

Ocol condemns diviner-priests
And Acoli herbalists
He says
They are all liars
Who deceive fools,
And steal people's chickens,
Goats, sheep, cattle and money. (93)

My husband agrees
That sometimes by accident
Some of the herbs are effective
He also admits
That not all who
Enter the whiteman's hospital
Walk home on their own feet
But are carried away
In comfortable beds
Painless, free of troubles,
No more bothered by hunger or anger
Or the complaints of their wives! (93)

All misfortunes have a root,
The snake bite, the spear of the enemy,
Lightning and the blunt buffalo horn,
These are the bitter fruits,
Grown on the tree of Fate
They do not fall anyhow,
They do not fall at random,
They do not come our way by accident
We do not just run into them. (98)

And to recover
A goat must be slaughtered
Your mother and her brother
Must spit blessings in your hand,
And then you will become a man again.
There is no medicine in the hospital
For a mother's curse,
None for an uncle's curse!
And when your father's anger
Has boiled over
The white man's medicines
Are irrelevant and useless
Like the freak rains
In the middle of the dry season. 100 (**Song of Lawino**)

Song of Lawino can be said to be successful because Okot p'Bitek drives home his critical commentary and elevates a basically situational problem to the height of the enduring and recurring. Lawino imagistic patterns build on her deficiency in matters of hygiene and her deficiency in medical know-how which emphasize her perceived intellectual bankruptcy from her husband's perspective to signify the neglect of the poor, their sufferings and woes. Ngugi has said elsewhere that *Song of Lawino* is "about the tendency in the African elite of taking on the ways of foreigners while in fact despising their own" and adds that Lawino's "disillusionment with Ocol is caused by not only his aping Western bourgeois culture but his utter dislike and hatred of his African peasant roots and values."²

Song of Lawino can be read as symbolic of the wider selfish political bitterness and acrimony that have been imposed on Uganda in particular (and Africa in general) by the emergent class of black leaders. The poem assails the

2. Alex Tetteh-Lartey, (1982) *BBC Arts and Africa* Interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o about Okot p'Bitek. In *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*. 152-153.

foibles of flag independence in its critique of the complacent ideology and anti-people politics that constitute the burning issues of the day.

In “The Buffaloes of Poverty Knock the People Down” Okot p’Bitek captures the drift and anarchy that set in with flag independence.

With the coming
Of the new political parties,
My husband roams the country-side
Like a wild goat;...(103)

Ocol does not enter
His brother’s house.
You would think
There was homicide between them (104)

And while the pythons of sickness
Swallow the children
And the buffaloes of poverty
Knock the people down
And ignorance stands there
Like an elephant,/The warleaders
Are tightly locked in bloody feuds,
Eating each other’s liver ... (112) (**Song of Lawino**)

Song of Lawino then, is a remarkable manifestation of p’Bitek’s deep concern about the fate of his country and people. In *Writers in Politics* (1981), Ngugi wa Thiong’o comes to a similar conclusion:

Song of Lawino is the one poem that has mapped out new areas and new directions in East African poetry. It belongs to the soil. It is authentically East African in its tone and appeal. This can be seen in its reception. It is read everywhere, arousing heated debates (1981 92)

Okot p'Bitek's art is a critical examination of the nature and content of politics and social organization and institutions in contemporary African setting.

(iii) The Example of Wole Soyinka

Wole Soyinka's poems are complex and the solution of riddles in the use of images adds excitement so that as often as you read his poems you learn new things. In "Death in the Dawn" the poet is inspired by the experience of seeing a man killed in a motor accident while travelling early in the morning. It is a tedious and fruitless task trying to work out the logic of the images, as for instance in Christopher Okigbo's "Elegy for Alto" or Okot p'Bitek's "The Buffaloes of Poverty Knock the People Down," since the meaning of Soyinka's poem is transferred immediately to feeling:

Death in the Dawn

Traveller, you must set out
At dawn. And wipe your feet upon
The dog-nose wetness of the earth.

Let sunrise quench your lamps. And watch
Faint brush pricklings in the sky light
Cottoned feet to break the early earthworm
On the hoe. And shadows stretch with sap
Not twilight's death and sad prostration.
This soft kindling, soft receding breeds
Racing joys and apprehensions for
A naked day. Burdened hulks retract,
Stoop to the mist in faceless throng
To wake the silent markets – swift, mute
Processions on grey byways...

On this
Counterpane, it was –
Sudden winter at the death

Of dawn's lone trumpeter. Cascades
Of white feather-flakes ... but it proved
A futile rite. Propitiation sped
Grimly on, before

The right foot for joy, the left, dread
And the mother prayed, Child
May you never walk
When the road waits, famished

Traveller, you must set forth
At dawn
I promise marvels of the holy hour
Presages as the white cock's flapped
Perverse impalement – as who would dare
The wrathful wings of man's Progression...

But such another Wraith! Brother,
Silenced in the startled hug of
Your invention – is the mocked grimace
This closed contortion – I?

(10-11)

“Death in the Dawn” is an excellent example of how a poet can compress much meaning into few words. *Verbal irony* is often employed to describe the implication of meaning opposite to the direct or literal meaning of words in statements through the use of contrast by which means Soyinka juxtaposes opposites directly. The title of the poem shows this aspect since dawn implies beginning and hope, while death destroys. The *irony* of human life is presented in the major images of “Death in the Dawn,” highlighted in the accidental killing of a cock by the traveller's car.

Paradox, which is a form of irony i.e. the linking of ideas or feelings which are seemingly contradictory, but which actually express a basic truth when they are put together

and implications are deduced, is a favourite device of Soyinka's poetic technique. "Death in the Dawn" is full of paradoxical statements and situations. The killing of a cock should have been a sacrifice to make the journey safe, but the presumed sacrifice is fruitless since the man is crushed by the car, an invention that is made for his swift travelling. The expressions in the poem have logical meanings. Soyinka intensifies the sadness in his poem by placing side by side words that refer to life and growth and those that refer to death and waste.

The last stanza of the poem demonstrates Soyinka's mastery of rhetorical and tonal variation. We recall that tonal variation is the purposeful alteration of the dominant tone, such as in an elegy — a poem lamenting the death of someone, in which the writer may move from a state of mourning to some kind of faith or to a triumphant recognition of the immortality of the deceased one and of man. Soyinka however stretches this definition further:

‘But such another Wraith! Brother,
Silenced in the startled hug of
Your invention — is this mocked grimace
This closed contortion — I?’

Soyinka here achieves a strong effect through understatement in the deliberate underplaying of an emotion, a thought, a judgment, or the implications of a situation. In "Death in the Dawn" the poet is inspired by the experience of seeing a man killed in a motor accident while travelling early in the morning. At the end of the poem (see last stanza above), Soyinka/the speaker is shocked into identifying himself with the distorted figure of the killed man, thereby making the incident described in "Death in the Dawn" apply universally.

The understatement in “Death in the Dawn” implies that the poet’s emotion is too vast to express; hence the reader detects the ironic difference between what Soyinka actually says and what the circumstances would really allow him to state. In fact, what makes Soyinka a successful poet is his favourite method of understatement as a key poetic literary device.

(iv) The Example of Leopold Sedar Senghor and Agostinho Neto

One way for the aspiring poet to appreciate and thus imitate the individual musical quality of Senghor’s or Neto’s free verse is to read each poem out loud. Although the eye can scan a line of Neto’s or Senghor’s poetry, the ear must hear its sound. If you unite the eye, the ear, and the reasoning capacity of your mind, you will be better able to engage in oral interpretation, the name given to the art of reading poetry aloud effectively and meaningfully.

Implicit in the above observation is that analyzing or imitating *the sound* of a poem should never be divorced from your investigation of its meaning. To say that Senghor and Neto use *blank verse* is meaningless. The crucial questions are:

- a) How do Senghor and Neto use *free verse* and for *what purpose*?
- b) How does Senghor and Neto’s poetry differ?

Neto and Senghor are both masters of *free verse*. Their individual poetry gives insights into the moods, emotions, or attitudes which each poet wishes to convey and the meaning each attempts to communicate. Let us consider first Senghor’s

(for *kehalem*)

Long, long you have held between your hands

Long, long you have held between your hands the black
face of the warrior

Held as if already there fell on it a twilight of death.

From the hill I have seen the sun set in the bays of your
eyes.

When shall I see again, my country, the pure horizon of
your face?

When shall I sit down once more at the dark table of
your breast?

Hidden in the half-darkness, the nest of gentle words.

I shall see other skies and other eyes

I shall drink at the spring of other mouths cooler than
lemons

I shall sleep under the roof of other heads of hair in
shelter

from storms.

But every year, when the rum of springtime sets my
memory ablaze,

I shall be full of regret for my homeland and the rain
from your eyes on the thirsty savannahs. (270-271)

Leopold Sedar Senghor has had a distinguished career as a scholar, philosopher and politician. He has taken a prominent part in the cultural and political development of Senegal and of Africa. As the foremost thinker and writer on African culture (with the exception of Aimé Césaire and Léon Gontran Damas), Senghor, has been the greatest advocate of the philosophy of Negritude. When he uses the word woman, as he does in most of his poems, he often refers to Senegal as much as to a real woman. To the Serer, a person belongs to the family of the mother. This in part accounts for the rapturous tone of “Long, long you have held between your hands.”

Senghor has written that, “woman in Africa occupies the first place... because she does not leave the family and is the giver of life; woman has been made the source of the life-force, that is to say, the depository of the clan’s past and the guarantor of its future.”

To achieve musical effect in “Long, long you have held between your hands,” Senghor draws upon numerous other devices, chief among which is rhyme, i.e. the use of matching sounds, generally accented vowels at the end of two lines or more of his verse. Generally speaking, the repetition of sounds through rhyme contributes significantly to the musical quality of Senghor’s poem and particularly to its meaning as this calls attention to important pairing of words in “Long, long you have held between your hands.”

It is clear that Senghor thinks of his poetry not as an object of art to be enjoyed for itself but as a vehicle for passionate communication. Images in the poem reinforce this attitude. The images work by analogy rather than equation; they do not mainly describe, they evoke emotions and spiritual realities. It is clear therefore in this poem that it is in the tradition of *the praise song* in which Senghor addresses the object of praise with meaningful, rapturous phrases.

In comparing his *free verse style* to Okot p’Bitek, Christopher Okigbo or Agostinho Neto (see below) the aspiring poet must pay attention to:

- a) the content
- b) the expressed attitude to poetry
- c) the quality of the imagery and
- d) the general tone of the poem.

(v) The Example of Agostinho Neto

The themes of Agostinho Neto's poetry range from the need to use valuable elements from the past to shape the future. One of the dominant concerns of *Sacred Hope* is the relationship between his personal predicament and the experience of the Angolan people among whom he grew. In the preface to this volume of poetry, Basil Davidson describes Agostinho Neto's achievements as "Chants of sorrow, these are also songs of joy. Poems of departure, they are also poems of arrival."

Let us start action vigorous male intelligent
Which answers tooth for tooth eye for eye
Man for man
Come vigorous action
Of the people's army of the liberation of men
Come whirlwinds to shatter this passiveness

Let us not wait for heroes
Let us be heroes
Uniting our voices and our arms

Each at his duty
And defend inch by inch our land (*Sacred Hope*, 1974
74-75)

Although some of the contributory elements such as assonance, alliterations, the rhythm etc. have been lost in translation, structurally, Neto's poetry thrives on a lyrical repetitiveness of images and syntactic patterns in a manner reminiscent of motifs in jazz. The pursuit of the rhythmic effect is never at the expense of Neto's political commitment and ideological alignment. *Rhythm* is therefore a device for Neto to draw and focus attention on specific aspects of larger historical preoccupation.

Almost all the poems in *Sacred Hope* are written in *free verse*, that is, without a regular arrangement of rhymes and stanza forms. The poems are written without any regular patterns or stanzas, metre and rhyme. Agostinho Neto does not write prose because he still wants to maintain *a certain intensity of concentration* that verse needs. In the case of *Sacred Hope*, the poet writes *free verse* of varying lengths and metre. Although called *free verse* it has control of its own.

We shall now proceed to discuss guidepost to the art of writing poetry beginning with *style* or *poetic diction*.

Stock-Taking for the Aspiring Poet

- a) We noted above that poetry is generally distinguished from prose by its compression, its emphasis on suggestive language (figures of speech, for example) and its use of musical arrangements of syllables and words. Some prose, however, is so poetic and some poetry so prosaic that the distinction can become blurred. The typography of a poem is sometimes the only reason why it is classified as *poetry*.
- b) You need to comprehend the importance of *technique* and understand the specific means available to you to shape your own insights. This requires your knowledge of *terminology* and, more important, your ability to apply this knowledge to your creative response to events, situations etc.
- c) As a means of exploring fully your creative process, you need to pay particular attention to the form of your poem. It implies what shapes your poem as a result of all technical resources employed by you. Content is the material i.e. the ideas, emotions,

events, people that you are shaping. A fusion of content and form occurs when you have chosen and successfully employed the most suitable technical devices to develop your subject matter. Imaginative literature frequently communicates the emotions of human experience so powerfully that it can have an overwhelming impact on your audience. In writing your own poem, you must therefore involve and engage your readers through your mastery of form.

- d) As pointed out in c (above) you need to establish a technique when you write your poem. It is the only avenue you have as a poet of discovering, exploring, developing your subject, of conveying its meaning, and finally, of evaluating it. Your technique is the numerous methods and devices you may use to shape your material. Awareness and mastery of technique may result in rich explorations of form and content.
- e) Your poem may stress ideas offering insight into human nature and situations or into abstract ideas; to tell a story; to express an emotion; to create a mood or atmosphere; to describe some scene, thing, or person; to amuse; to satirize; or to accomplish any combination of these or any purpose not listed here – but, you must pay attention to the musical characteristics of the work since variations have purpose in terms of meaning and emotional intensity. The need to achieve balance in the *structure* of your poem is related to solidity of content, for if an important point is played down, then the content as well as the organization will be defective.

- f) As a perceptive poet, your art should have its own *shape* or *design*. Without some kind of design your poem would be incoherent to your readers. Clear organization requires meticulous attention to the relationships of parts and details in your poem. Without patient, careful planning, your poem will be a mere toy. You must be willing to cope with complex problems in the art of poetry writing. If you are unwilling, then your poem is not likely to meet the requirements of solidity of content discussed under African poets of great eloquence (p'Bitek, Okigbo, Soyinka, Senghor, and Neto.)
- g) Superficiality occurs when the aspiring poet takes the easy path. Avoiding complex problems (such as conventions and devices of poetic structure) will rarely result in successful poetry. Sound content, for instance, will be possible in your poetry if you allow the reading experience to stimulate your thinking. You must constantly strive to go beyond routine oversimplified development of poetic statements. Your poem must provide an emotional and intellectual impact of wonder or awe on your reader! Of all genres, poetry stimulates the greatest sensitivity to words, images, and syntactical problems. Conciseness must be the general characteristic of the style of your poems. But, poetic style includes more than conciseness and imagery.

Style and Poetic Diction

John Gardi, a poet and critic in *How Does A Poem Mean* (Boston, 1959 779) has argued that "The fact that a good poem will never wholly submit to explanation is not its deficiency but its very life." A close study of style and poetic diction involves numerous factors:

- a) The poet's vocabulary or choice of words. The reader can determine whether your usage is vague or concrete, vivid and vigorous or turgid and dull, *denotative* or *connotative*, conversational or formal, archaic, artificial or ornate.
- b) It deals with the economy or expansiveness in your use of words and details. You must always remember that *compression* is generally characteristic of poetry. Your attitude, which is apparent because of your choice of words or your arrangement of details, determines your *tone*. Involved are such attitudes as the ironic, satiric, objective, pessimistic, cynical, comic, tragic or optimistic.
- c) Your use of sense impressions, description and figures of speech, that is *imagery*; the arrangement of words and sentences which cover such things as the simplicity or complexity of sentences, the balance of the parts, parallelism, syntax, periodic and loose sentences etc. Most poetry depends heavily on patterns of sound or musical qualities. The music and language of your poems must be inseparable, for your choice and arrangement of words create the sound of your poem. And, although prose may have rhythm and a musical quality, it is your concentration on the devices of sound, which will distinguish your poetic style and diction from that of prose.
- d) *Similes* and *metaphors* as well as other *figures of speech* will frequently fall into patterns, which dominate the style or meaning of your poem. A single metaphor in a short poem can be extended to such a point that the entire meaning of the poem is

conveyed by the process of association inherent in the figure of speech i.e. images that are often intentionally indirect; they generally depend on the process of association; the deliberate linking of two elements. (By using allusions the poet invokes the details or meaning involved in the reference and adapts them to his purpose.) As figures of speech, allusions should evoke images from the cultural storehouse available to you.

- e) *Imagery* is vital to style. It includes both *images* and *figures of speech*. An image is generally a sense impression created by a direct or recognizable sense appeal in words. Such an appeal should present a description so graphic or clear that your reader can relate it to his own senses or his own experience. You must also make sure that your images fall into patterns related to the meaning of your poem. The pattern of images should therefore become the dominant symbols lifting your reader beyond the literal level of your poem.
- f) *Structure* is a key literary device in the successful poem. The need to achieve balance in the structure of your poem is related to solidity of content, for if an important point is played down, then the content as well as the organization of your poem is defective. You must strive at achieving individuality of structure in each poem you write, since this device is frequently dependent on your linking of words or details throughout the poem. *Structure* is part of style. It is the basic organization or arrangement of all the words, details, images, and parts of a poem. Your choices in all these areas ultimately fashion your vision and meaning, which

of course, can vary from poem to poem especially if you prefer to experiment in the stylistic shaping of your material.

- g) *Style* is related to and, in fact, shapes all of the technical explorations of a work of literature. It pertains to your choice of words and their arrangement in patterns of syntax, imagery, and rhythm. *Rhythm* includes *meter*, yet is larger than the metrical pattern, for instance. Only by knowing the many possibilities that you have for arranging words, images and related symbols can you fully explore the subtleties and complexities of poetic style. *Style* constitutes your imaginative rendering of whatever thoughts, emotions, situations or characters you choose to create and communicate. A close study of style would therefore involve many factors. Weaknesses in style could be attributed to such blemishes as jargon, archaisms, wordiness and incoherent poetic structures, clichés, hackneyed phrases; overemphasizing an already obvious point; stating a concept in more words than are necessary etc.

Your poem should be written with an economy that is designed to expose the sudden visual impact, which is the hallmark of the successful poetic voice. When your vocabulary is poor or your word sense is based on bad habits and poor logical processes, you are likely to produce poetry that is mediocre.

- h) *Metaphor* is a direct or indirect substitution of one element for another. It is a key anchor to poetic style. It is what contributes to perspective, which is essentially an attempt to determine, analyze and

evaluate the creative process. For, it raises the following questions:

- a) Who is the narrator/the persona in your poem?
- b) Are you maintaining distance between yourself and your created persona, or are you communicating directly?

Perspective enables your reader to get to know how your poem is told or what techniques you are using to communicate events, ideas, attitudes, or emotions in your poem.

- i) *Syntax*: This involves how you arrange and group your words in lines and their grammatical and meaningful relationships to each other. It is therefore necessary that at this point we turn to the importance of *Denotation* and *Connotation* in poetic composition.

Denotation and Connotation as Aspects of Poetic Composition

There is a difference between poetic diction and ordinary diction. It is not sufficient to point out particular devices in a poem. The most important thing is the ability to explain what effects they have and how the poet has fulfilled his intention through their use. Questions to be asked are:

- (i) Is there any evidence (such as key words, repetition of images, symbols etc), which leads the reader to suspect that the poem must be taken beyond its literal meaning?
- (ii) What is the relationship of the structural devices to the meaning of the poem?

- (iii) If the poet has used the following musical techniques: alliteration, consonance, onomatopoeia, parallelism etc. how do they contribute to the mood and meaning of the poem? Does the poet achieve what Edgar Allan Poe called the “totality of effect” — a unity of *all* the poetic means employed?

(i) Denotation

It is the exact or dictionary definition of a word; where the dictionary provides alternate definitions or various shades of meaning, you should choose the most suitable definition. At the literal level, your concern is with denotation, syntactical relationships, the possibilities of paraphrase, and comprehension of basic facts to be found in a poem. In writing your poem, however, you have to justify what effects these have and how you have fulfilled your intention by their use.

(ii) Connotation

Take away the connotative force of literature, and we no longer have poetry. Poetry like other literary forms is a departure from the normal standard form of language usage. It is a departure enriched by the various *figures of speech*. In figurative language quite often there is deliberate ambiguity, which allows for multiple interpretations. Connotations are the various implications or associations that a word carries. Most words have many connotations. *Figures of speech*, (all of which involve association such as irony, hyperbole, oxymoron etc.), constitute the structure of a poem. Images become dominant symbols lifting the reader beyond the literal level.

The real force of your poem then is its reliance on its power of suggestiveness i.e. the inferences, implications, or suggestiveness of words, phrases, and figures of speech. Usually these become meaningful only in context — the

surroundings of a given word or image and its relationship to specific elements in its verbal environments. Figurative reading of your poem should involve careful exploration of connotative values and context. From this awareness comes the reader's close reading of your poem as a work of art.

Further Comments on Selected African Poets

- (i) The political upheavals in Nigeria (1965 – 1967) have provided an atmosphere in which Christopher Okigbo very accurately prophesies the bloody turbulence and destruction of the subsequent years starting with the 1966 January coup d'état. In "Elegy for Alto" like most of the poems in *Paths of Thunder Poems Prophesying War*, Okigbo has borrowed from the oral tradition. The entire political scene in Nigeria comes under the surveying rays of the poet's imagination in clear and impeccable images. We, the readers are expected to see that there is some sort of connection between physical ugliness and political corruption. Okigbo is a poet who pays great attention to the arresting power of carefully chosen imagery and symbols. The poet has ransacked the inner resources of poetic diction and forms across cultures to confirm him as the purist image-maker, but also portray him as much more developed in tone and seriousness, precise in his visions, and clear in his expression.

Christopher Okigbo's significance in African literary consciousness lies not only in his satirical exposure of the hollowness and lack of originality of the African political class but also in its form. In satire, a poet frequently employs irony. "Elegy for Alto" shows how successfully an African poet brilliantly and startlingly exploits myths, rhythms and narrative techniques in African orature.

- (ii) Wole Soyinka's "Death in the Dawn" suggests a view of life as a journey and consequently implies a symbolic use of the road as a *structural principle* of the poem. The poem relates the road to fate or destiny.

"The right foot for joy, the left, dread
And the mother prayed, Child
May you never walk
When the road waits, famished."

In "Death in the Dawn" the road is man's wheel through a pilgrimage and it "waits famished" to take those who fall in the inevitable journey. Soyinka is unique among African poets in that he demands a change from reliance on tradition alone to reliance on tradition and personal integrity. His voice represents a new realism "that is very different from the near ravings of early nationalist literature or the idealized image of the African in some of Senghor's poems."

(iii)

I do not understand
The meaning of Uhuru
I do not understand
Why all the bitterness
And the cruelty
And the cowardice,
The fear,
The deadly fear
Eats the hearts
Of the political leaders!
Is it the money?
Is it the competition for position?

Someone said
Independence falls like a buffalo
And the hunters
Rush to it with drawn knives,
Sharp, shining knives
For carving the carcass.
And if your chest
Is small, bony and weak
They push you off
And if your knife is blunt
You get the dung on your elbow
But come home empty-handed
And the dogs bark at you. (*Song of Lawino* 1984 188 – 189)

The aspiring poet should not be taken in by the deceptive simplicity of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. The poet has borrowed the form from the oral tradition. In traditional settings, poetry and songs function as newspapers, as media for information and mutual encouragement. We do not only see how successful satire has been used by p'Bitek in his indictment of the African middle class who have so "unashamedly embraced Western bourgeois values and modes of life" in *Song of Lawino*, we also see how the African song gets its effect from an accumulation of details, statements and imagery, and in the variation of the tone and attitude of Lawino to the object of her condemnation, Ocol.

Okigbo in "Elegy for Alto" writes free verse, which cannot be scanned in terms of patterns of iambs and trochees, even though he has employed these in *Paths of Thunder Poems Prophesying war*. Yet his verse is very rhythmical because of unconventional patterns of stress, varying lengths of lines, word groupings to sound, relationships of images, unconventional topography used to direct proper reading of his verse and alternation or omission of standard practices of punctuation.

You too could write in this vein, but remember that in its very flexibility – if not properly handled – free verse, could lead to your poetry being inflated or loosely organized. If your “poem” in free verse lacks a sense of rhythm, it can become prose masquerading as poetry.

On Writing your Own Poem: Stylistic and Thematic Considerations

- (i) Any failure to develop (check, revise, expand) can have a detrimental effect upon both the content and organization of your poem. You must read and study the poems carefully. If you simply begin to write without this kind of preparation, your poem is likely to be far too sentimental and possibly ill conceived.
- (ii) During your preparation before writing the first draft of your poem, you must pay attention not only to your reading but also to the complicated procedures shaping your insights. Knowledge of Leopold Sedar Senghor’s *elegy* or *lament* allows you to recognize how the poet develops meaning and structure by following tradition and also to determine whether Senghor is deviating from oral traditions.
- (iii) Your poem can be well written and clearly organized, but still say little or nothing. You will discover that nothing, including an outstanding style, can compensate for empty content. Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* is an incisive critique of bourgeois mannerisms and colonial education and values. Lawino denounces her husband, ridicules the world he has chosen and proudly asserts the primacy of her peasant values and cultural symbols. First written in Lwo and then translated into English by the author, the poet’s satire is against the self-hatred that makes the Ocol’s totally rejected and even consciously repudiate their roots in the African world!

- (iv) If the content is to be sound, the subject matter must be relevant. Patriotic poetry occupies a prominent position in African poetry. The significance of Agostinho Neto's poetry in the struggle for Angolan independence is subsumed within the overall active involvement of literature and culture in the strategy of the political party, MPLA

Against the dilemma of today
of being submissive or persecuted
are our days of sacrifice
and audacity
for the right
to live thinking to live acting
freely humanly

between dreams and desire
when shall we see each other
late or early
tell me love
More justly even grows
the longing to be
with our peoples
today always and even more
free free free (*Sacred Hope*, 1974 62)

If you are going to be intensely autobiographical; if you are transmuting into imaginative expression the reality of your experience like Agostinho Neto, although your work may yield valuable interpretations on their own, some of them will become even more meaningful in the context of your life. You must realize however when writing your poem that an author is not always aware of everything that is a product of the creative process thus the need to emphasis caution on the unconscious elements in your work.

- (v) In conceiving the structure of your art you must pay close attention to the internal dynamics of your poem. In addition to the impact of Western and traditional conventions, you must also explore other ways whereby you can arrange the materials of your poem. *Perspective, setting, style* etc. can have profound influence on how you arrange or organize the imaginative rendering of the human experience.
- (vi) Your mastery of technique will result in rich exploration of your form and content. The word *how* refers to technique. You need to recognize *how* you present your emotions and ideas and create themes, atmosphere or moods in your poems.

Review

- i) A new trend has emerged in the writing of African poetry as in poetry in general. All the poems are written in *free verse*, that is, without a regular arrangement of rhymes and stanza forms. Neto's, Senghor's, p'Bitek's, Okigbo's and Soyinka's poems are written without any regular patterns or stanza, metre or rhyme.
- ii) Agostinho Neto, for instance, does not in *Sacred Hope* write prose. Although his poetry is labelled free verse it has control of its own.
- iii) There is a marked lyricism in each of the poets treated. It is as a result of what they make of traditional beliefs and customs in their poetry that elevates their poetry to the level of the sublime. In poems that deal with modern life, there is criticism of the African elite and its accompanying crimes against the people. You must, like Okigbo or p'Bitek, identify and use African traditional forms in your poetry.

- iv) Endeavour always to create moods and emotions in your poetry. This is crucial in poetic composition.
- v) Devices and modes such as: the topography of the page involving the deliberate arrangement of words or even syllables and letters in your poem, tone, the logical progression, for example of cause-and-effect, question-and-answer, key words or repeated sentence patterns serving as meaningful threads; stanzaic progression in the relationship of each stanza to the others, a dominant theme or idea etc. is what shapes the structure of your poem. True, all these will not occur in any single poem you write, but you will realize some of them.

In writing your poem similar in theme and style to the poems examined above, take note of the problems you encounter as they might help you to appreciate the technical achievements of Okigbo, p'Bitek, Neto, Senghor and Soyinka.

In conclusion, the procedures we have demonstrated above may not solve all of the specific problems involved in writing your own poem; however, they do show how closely linked your *writing* and *reading* are. In effect, the poem, which you ultimately write, shapes the insights gathered from your reading.

Section Two

Guidepost on the Art of Prose Fiction

Preface

Perspective, setting, characterization, and style do have profound influence on how you arrange, or organize your imaginative rendering of the human experience. The hero of your narrative, for instance, is being exposed to other people, he is expected to gain in experience, and progress from *innocence* to *knowledge*, and should often come to terms with reality, since, your prose fiction will be dealing, realistically, with human relationships, with man and society.

You will write a satisfying fictional work if your technique is exacting and your imagination sufficiently powerful to create interesting characters and situations and a fully realized body of life, thus minimizing the chances of your content being too obtrusive. Prose fiction depends largely on the development of *plot*, *character* and *theme*. There are three questions, which you must always endeavour to answer when you write:

- a) What happens?
- b) Who does it?
- c) What does it mean?

According to Philip Stevick in *The Meaning of the Novel* (1967) a successful novel must have the following qualities:

- a coherent unified prose narrative
- with a beginning, a middle and end
- with materials deployed in such a way as to give the image of coherence
- continuity and wholeness

Stevick also argues that a successful novel must possess “certain tensions and anticipations regarding the central characters carried through the entire length of the work, to be resolved only at the end”(4).

Writing a Fictitious Prose Narrative: Guideposts

- i) Your work must engage the readers understanding of life
- ii) It should develop your readers mind and extend the range of their sympathies
- iii) It must satisfy their curiosities and even deepen the reader’s knowledge of the social, political and historical issues of the day
- iv) Your work must demonstrate *organic unity* since it must engage the interest of your readers and excite their feelings, not by reason of the particular elements that enter into it, but by reason of their interrelations.

On the Short Story and Novel

The *novel* differs from the *short story* (which is another fictitious prose narrative) because *the latter* concentrates on

- a) a particular situation or episode
- b) it makes sparing use of dialogue

The novel is:

- a) more discursive
- b) more leisurely

As a novelist then, you can show your capacity for psychological penetration by taking your reader into your character's minds, illustrating to the reader the mainspring of their actions and fully revealing their personality through their thoughts, actions and the dialogue.

Aspects of Fiction

Arnold Kettle in *An Introduction to the English Novel* (1968) has argued that successful novels contain two elements:

- a) life
- b) pattern

This implies that a successful novel, like every good work of art, is a reflection of life. Its coherence of unity arises from such a fusion of elements that the reader can grasp as an image of life. As a novelist, you are therefore expected to:

- a) communicate to the reader that the words on the page add up to a realistic world peopled by realistic men and women engaged in realistic activity
- b) By pattern is meant, not just the formal elements such as plot, structure and coherence, although these might be part of it, but meaning, significance and moral design.

In the attempt to impose some pattern on the life that you present, you are not merely expected to give a photographic copy of life or a reportorial account of it without implying what you think about it.

You may try to do any or all of the following in your story:

- i) clarify and evaluate issues, situations and characters

- ii) try to impose some order on the chaos of experience
- iii) try to enlarge the reader's sympathies
- iv) open your reader's eyes to areas of experience he never knew existed.

The perceptive reader of fiction is always going to assess your strength as a successful writer by confronting you with the following questions:

- a) Why was this particular thing selected?
- b) How would the choice of other available facts have made this a different story?
- c) What has led you to use these facts and reject others?

The above questions represent the fundamental aspects of any story, aspects that in more technical language are labelled as:

- PLOT
- CHARACTER
- THEME

In examining the works of four representative African Writers below,

- i) Ferdinand Leopold Oyono: *The Old Man and the Medal* (1956)
- ii) Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart* (1958)
- iii) Mariama Bâ: *So Long a Letter* (1979)
- iv) Aminata Sow Fall: *The Beggars' Strike* (1980)

you will realize that though plot, character and theme can each be thought of and discussed separately, in actuality they are completely interfused.

The characters in Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, Ferdinand Leopold Oyono and Chinua Achebe's prose fiction fulfil themselves only in action; and all human action involves a judgment of values, that is an idea, a theme. In other words, plot, character, and theme are abstracted from the organic unity, which is the story, from which they were abstracted.

As we shall illustrate when we examine the works of the four representative African authors of fiction (Achebe, Oyono, Bâ and Fall), their works achieve organic unity and demonstrate their mastery of *perspective*.

Perspective in Fiction

- Perspective has to do with how you get your story told or what techniques you use to communicate events, ideas, attitudes, or emotions
- Are you maintaining distance between you and your created spokesman, or are you communicating directly?
- Who is the controlling spokesman in your story?
- Who is telling the story or unfolding the details?

Since perspective, then, encompasses almost every important approach in your story, this is often referred to as point of view.

Point of View

Point of view involves realism, which is a very important component of the successful novel. Since this involves a full and authentic report of human experience it should satisfy your reader with such matters as coherence, manipulation of judgment, the mingling of scenes, summary and description etc. Point of view will therefore relate to the following aspects of your story:

- a) Plot and Structure
- b) Characterization
- c) Setting and Atmosphere
- d) Theme and Meaning

Organic unity is expressive and significant as an aspect of fiction, because your choice of point of view establishes or masks the degree of the distance between you and your own views of those characters whose action you delineate.

The subject of point of view however has been the source of considerable controversy in recent years, thus note the following points:

- 1) You may directly tell the story and participate actively in some degree
- 2) Your participation may stem from your style, which helps create tone (irony, for example), from overt analysis and judgment of characters; from manipulation and shifting to and from several characters within one story, or
- 3) From an intrusion of your own attitudes in a desire to be didactic.

In discussing below, the THREE BASIC APPROACHES, which are open to you in fashioning the point of view of your story, you must recall to mind the advice of Dorothy Van Ghent in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953):

We judge a novel also by the cogency and illuminative quality of the view of life that it affords, the idea embodied in its cosmology (7).

An obvious test of fiction then is that the actions and motives of your characters are rendered coherent. It would be to your glory to be able to render coherent so many strange and out-of-the way, and often apparently self-contradictory examples of human nature.

Three Basic Approaches of Point of View

The author seemingly steps aside and turns over the telling of the story to a persona (a created character), the narrator. Even though the narrator unfolds the plot, the reader does not forget that the author is always behind him.

You may now pay close attention to various approaches open to you when you write your own story.

- a) The omniscient author: You choose whatever perspective you want at any time in the plot and you intrude directly as much as you care to
- b) Limited omniscience: You tell the story but focus on a single character, or, to use a favourite word of Henry James, a “consciousness.” In this approach everything you tell filters through the chosen consciousness, and the reactions of the single character make him a reflector of what happens in your story or narration.
The single character’s responses may be based on varying degrees of awareness, ranging from the most naïve to the most sophisticated. As he responds to events around him, he may arrive at a meaningful discovery about himself, other people, his environment, or his moral and spiritual relationships.
- c) The dramatic point of view: This is the most objective of all. Like the dramatist, you are expected to put your characters into action, building

your plot and meaning around their dialogue. Your intrusions are confined solely to the description of setting and physical actions and movements and to the designation of speakers. Such intrusions can reveal your attitude (i.e. tone) for example by the adjectives you use – but generally speaking, in this point of view the reader notices only the characters created by you.

Preface to Aspects of Successful African Novels

Technique cannot be neglected in the evaluation of a work's quality since no discussion of an African work of art can afford to neglect technique and subject matter. Technique and subject matter must not be separated.

The totality of the African novel's impact and meaning is a composite of the following:

- a) subject matter
- b) plot
- c) structure
- d) style
- e) narrative method etc

Technique affects all of these. It is the means by which Oyono, Achebe, Bâ and Sow Fall shape and explore experience in *The Old Man and the Medal*, *Things Fall Apart*, *So Long a Letter* and *The Beggars' Strike* respectively. It is the means by which each of these fiction writers develop their theme(s) and finally evaluate the world they have presented.

While it is important to pay attention to what each of these novelists has *to say*, it is equally important to pay attention to *the way* in which each of them says it. As works of prose fiction Oyono, Achebe, Bâ and Sow Fall are realistic in artistic inclination, since their various works deal with issues and modes of conduct applicable to human beings.

Technique is what each of them uses in *The Old Man and the Medal*, *Things Fall Apart*, *So Long a Letter* and *The Beggars' Strike*, to convince the reader that the world they create is a world of ordinary human beings and ordinary human activity.

In *The Beggars' Strike*, Aminata Sow Fall pays attention to details in the individuality of her characters by highlighting, for instance, their particular idiosyncrasies, and defining their environments, precisely. In Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* the world presented seems a reflection of normal human activity that the people look like realistic men and women and the issues and modes of conduct presented is applicable to the human race.

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Ferdinand Leopold Oyono in *The Old Man and the Medal* are under an obligation to convince us of the reality of the world they have created in their works of fiction. This is one of the reasons why they have resorted to detailed description of objects, places, events, and individuals or their inner thoughts.

Criteria for Evaluation

The passages reprinted below are a useful compass to good fiction. It would, however, be useful for you to read the four novels in their entirety. In doing so, you must always keep in mind the following questions as for example in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*:

- a) What are the characters like? (Ramatoulaye, Daouda, Aissatou, Modou Fall etc.)
- b) Are these character's "real" (i.e. characters can be original and typical, rather than special, and the author needs no elaborate technique in presenting them).

- c) What do characters like Aissatou, Modou Fall and Daouda in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* want?
- d) Why do Mariama Bâ's characters do what they do?
- e) Do their actions logically follow from their natures?
- f) As a young lady and spinster, Ramatoulaye had a number of suitors from among whom she chose Modou Fall as her husband. One such suitor was Daouda who Ramatoulaye's mother favoured but who was rejected by Ramatoulaye herself. So, what do their actions tell us about their character(s)?
- g) How are the individual pieces of action, the special incidents related to each other? In what ways are the life experiences of Ramatoulaye similar to and different from that of Aissatou, her friend?
- h) What is the point – the theme of *So Long a Letter*? Mariama Bâ's intention is to arouse female consciousness against their deprivations, and disadvantages which men through culture, religion and legislation impose on women. The story virtually covers Ramatoulaye's experiences from childhood to college days, courtship, and marriage and to the climactic death of her husband through which the plight of the woman in a man's world is revealed.
- i) How are the characters and incidents related to theme?
- j) How are the characters in *So Long a Letter* related to each other? What are the points of conflicts among them? Which are major and which minor?

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979)

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is a letter to all advocating women's liberation and independence. It is an example of an epistolary novel; a novel in which the narrative is conveyed entirely by the exchange of letters. Bâ's intention is to expose men's dominance and female disabilities and at the same time urge the women to take up the fight for their own liberation and independence.

In *So Long a Letter*, it is very obvious that Ramatoulaye, the heroine, questions the justification behind the relegation of women to the background in the political, religious and economic spheres. Both educated women in Bâ's novel reject polygamy and are not worse off for it. They married men of their choice.

To achieve these themes, Bâ resorts to the epistolary technique. People normally reveal themselves, their inner thoughts, feelings, personalities, consciously or unconsciously in letters. Bâ's novel is therefore a letter, which primarily narrates the experiences of two women friends who are more or less in the same predicament. Hence *So Long a Letter* is made up of incidents or episodes in their marriage life.

So Long a Letter is in a sense a first person narrative since letters are usually written in the first person. The reader is with Ramatoulaye, so to speak, as she formulates her thoughts, plans and ideas, and if he is sufficiently alert he might be able to estimate her motives.

- The epistolary technique has been skillfully used in *So Long a Letter*. It has resulted in a very powerful presentation of characters inner lives. Mariama Bâ weaves in satire and irony to caricature the absurd attempts Modou Fall makes at nightclubs to remain and act young in order to retain the interest of his young wife, Binetou. Satire and irony are effective when Bâ makes the relationship between the old man and the young girl unattractive.

- Again, the speed at which Tamsir (the late husband's brother, who already has three wives) wants to take over his brother's wife exposes his greed, ingratitude and insatiability.
- Though written in letter form, snatches of dialogue between characters are introduced. There are figures of speech that emphasize and deepen the meaning of what is said.

The passage below indicates that Daouda is still in love with the heroine hence his persistence in wanting to marry her. But unfortunately, Ramatoulaye does not love him enough to warrant marriage even though she admires him.

Daouda

You are chasing after a woman who has remained the same, Daouda, despite the intense ravages of suffering.

You who have loved me, who love me still – don't doubt it – try to understand me. My conscience is not accommodating enough to enable me to marry you, when only esteem, justified by your many qualities, pulls me towards you. I can offer you nothing else, even though you deserve everything. Esteem is not enough for marriage whose snares I know from experience. And then the existence of your wife and children further because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family.

You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, and the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change. I am sure you are motivated by

love, a love that existed well before your marriage and that fate has not been able to satisfy. It is with infinite sadness and tear-filled eyes that I offer you my friendship. Dear Daouda, please accept it. It is with great pleasure that I shall continue to welcome you to my house.

Shall I hope to see you again?

Ramatoulaye. (*So Long a Letter* 68)

The epistolary technique enables Mariama Bâ to successfully unravel the story of Ramatoulaye, a young Senegalese woman who spent 25 years of her life as a loving wife and whose husband Modou Fall turned out to be ungrateful. Ramatoulaye brought up in a strict Muslim family, lives up to the ideals of a Moslem wife but after 25 years of marriage she is abandoned by her husband for a younger woman with “shapely contours,” Binetou, who was his first daughter’s friend.

So Long a Letter virtually covers Ramatoulaye’s experiences from childhood to college days, courtship, and marriage and to the climactic death of her husband through which the plight of the woman in a man’s world is revealed. The letter is a record of the heroine’s emotional survival after her husband, Modou Fall, has taken a second wife, Binetou. Through the epistolary method, Mariama Bâ narrates Ramatoulaye’s reminiscences of her life as well as her friend Aissatou’s experiences, especially their married life.

Fictional Plot Structure

Plot is more important to prose fiction than to poetry. It encompasses every means that you may use to arrange and unify your material such as setting, point of view, characterization etc. Furthermore, since plot is the arrangement of a sequence of events, chronology is a means of organization of actions. In the least complicated plot

structure you will relate events in the order in which they naturally occur without any interruption of the movement of time.

It should be clear to you that in conceiving your story, you need not use traditional chronology or sequence as the basis of your plot structure. However, in your story your plot structure should be established along the following characteristics:

- exposition
- rising action
- climax
- dénouement

We shall re-examine these characteristics in the concluding part of this section.

Conflict, Theme and Meaning in Ferdinand Leopold Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*

- (i) An obvious test of your story is that the motives and actions of your character must be coherent or credible for the following reasons:
- a) For a character to be credible, it must make sense and be able to command your reader's belief.
 - b) The character's thoughts and actions must be coherent, for if the thoughts of the characters in your story simply do not make sense, we have to reject the story.
 - c) Human beings are a mixture of good and bad and frequently find themselves at cross-purposes and in conflict not only with outsiders but also with aspects of their own nature.

- d) The great and typical human conflict is one in which human beings are in conflict with other human beings. There must therefore be cause and effect in your story.

Ferdinand Leopold Oyono will long be remembered as a successful African storyteller for the following reasons:

- a) his vivid characterization
- b) his pungent irony
- c) his social realism
- d) his sense of humour

Oyono sees colonial rule as that of exploitation, oppression, humiliation, brutality and disregard of the African. He looks at colonialism as a system that brings to the African some pain. His first novel *Houseboy* (1956, English translation, 1966) deals with colonial injustice and brutality. In that novel, the chief character, Joseph Toundi, gives devoted services to his French masters who neither reward him nor pay him any salary. Instead he is humiliated, he suffers and finally receives imprisonment and death at their hands.

In *The Old Man and the Medal* (1956, English translation, 1957) Oyono's second novel, he exposes once more this murderous effect on the colonial psyche through the story of Meka. The following passage shows Meka at the presentation of the medal for his services to the white man.

On the verandah outside M. Fouconi's office Meka was the only black and khaki spot among the white suits of the Europeans of Doum. He kept forcing himself to smile to attract their attention. Every now and then a white hand passed over his head or by his ears before making a perfunctory gesture of admiration at the medal hanging on his chest.

He was pleased to notice that no one else among the whites was wearing a medal like his. He had given Father Vandermayer the broadest smile he could manage when the priest had tapped him on the shoulder and said with a smile at the corner of his mouth that he was now a most important person.

Meka did not know how he came to be standing outside the circle the Europeans had made round their Chief. His fellow Africans were already dancing in the courtyard. The drumming had begun after the end of the march past.

Meka did not know who to ask when they were to go to the African Community Centre. He went and tapped Father Vandermayer on the shoulder. The priest shot an angry glance at him and waved him away sharply with the back of his hand. Meka, quite bewildered, brought his hand up to his chin and opened his mouth like a fish. No, he could not believe it. Father Vandermayer could not be giving him an answer like that.

Meka moved a few steps away and leaned up against the wall. He stretched his legs and put his hands on his hips. He tossed his head several times and then held it still. His mouth hung open with his astonishment like the mouth of a strangled animal. He stared down at the floor in stupid fascination as if the cement had the eyes of a snake. He was no longer watching the group of white men and only the murmur of their conversation reached him. Where was it he had heard whites talking like that without understanding what they said and without seeing

them? He put his head in his hands and began to press on his temples as if he wanted to force the fleeting recollection out of the chaos of his memory. He frowned and then his face relaxed. He remembered. It was when he had been listening to a gramophone! He closed his eyes and dismissed Father Vandermayer, M. Fouconi and the great White Chief from his thoughts.

At that moment someone tapped him on the shoulder. Before he opened his eyes Meka felt it was Father Vandermayer. He recognized his way of tapping the faithful on the shoulder when he passed behind them on Sunday taking the collection.

‘Have you got sleeping sickness?’ he asked him in a bad Mvema. He started to laugh but the laugh froze on his lips. Meka had just given him the first angry look he had ever given in his life.

‘Are you ill, have you got a pain?’ stammered Father Vandermayer. ‘No, Father, I am rather tired,’ Meka lied.

‘You’ll feel better later on, at the Community Centre,’ said the priest and gave Meka’s ear a tug. ‘Yes, Father,’ said Meka.

Father Vandermayer when he rebuffed Meka realized too late that he had carelessly let his claws show and he wondered if Meka had noticed. He wanted to reassure himself and noticing Meka was no longer at his heels he had gone over to talk to him. He was soon reassured. He noticed nothing in Meka’s face, and went back to the others.

At last M. Fouconi mentioned the reception. The circle of Europeans opened to let the High Commissioner pass. When Meka noticed, he stood up and straightened the tails of his jacket. The

High Commissioner went down the steps and smiled at him. The whites got into their cars. Father Vandermayer invited Meka to get into the back of his van though there was no one with him in the cabin. The High Commissioner's car started first. M. Fouconi's followed, then Gullet's, then Father Vandermayer's. Meka sat down on a case of communion wine and took off his shoes. (96-98)

In the passage, we observe that all that Meka deserves for being an upright character is a worthless medal. The people of Doum agree by the end of *The Old Man and the Medal* that what has happened to Meka i.e. his humiliation and imprisonment by the colonial authorities has equally happened to all of them through him.

Oyono is a successful writer because of his mastery of style and literary technique:

- i) The most significant literary device used in *The Old Man and the Medal* is irony. It is used to emphasize theme, character and meaning. The novelist emphasizes the injustices to which the people of Doum are subjected as well as an artistic tool to satirize Gullet, Vandermayer, and Fouconi etc. in the novel and the entire colonial set up at the time.
- ii) The vivid details that catch the imagination helps to create the special quality, the "feel" of *The Old Man and the Medal*.
- iii) The story in *The Old Man and the Medal* is told from the third person perspective whereby Oyono narrates in the manner of an observer, the events as they happen to the characters in the story.

- iv) In the plot, we recognize a movement toward a point of rest, of resolution. In these actions, we recognize, too, unity and significance. That is, the actions in *The Old Man and the Medal* move toward an end, and the end settles something.
- v) The unity and significance of the action in the novel inheres in the action. These are the test of the novelist's usefulness in selection, in creating atmosphere aroused by the various factors in *The Old Man and the Medal*, such as setting, character, theme and the like.
- vi) Oyono is popular, then, as a writer because of the special qualities of his *narrative art*.
- vii) His style in *The Old Man and the Medal* is characterized by its simplicity. His language is lucid and his settings uncomplicated. Oyono deliberately chooses very simple diction in his novel. Most of his words are easily recognizable. He tends to pack whatever ingenuity of language he has in the profuse use of imagery.

Language is the way that leads the reader into the meaning of a story, into an understanding of the characters and their actions. Oyono suits the language of the characters to their actions. In *The Old Man and the Medal*, the novelist uses a variety of what language specialists call language registers to depict the different characters and their social status and to explore the moral questions with which the novel deals. In a number of significant ways, then, one might say that language as a means to insight and social differentiation is one of the main preoccupations of the successful African novelist.

(ii) In arriving at the crucial question of character, theme or meaning in Ferdinand Leopold Oyono's novel, as illustrated above, the following factors were taken into consideration:

- That the reader expects in successful fiction an idea about, some stance toward experience, and if we do not get it we are dissatisfied.
- Every successful story must indicate some basis for the relation among its parts, for *The Old Man and the Medal* is Ferdinand Leopold Oyono's way of saying how the reader can make sense of human experience during the era of colonialism.
- The plot is the structure of Oyono's novel. It is the structure of the action as presented in *The Old Man and the Medal*. It represents the treatment Oyono makes of the events of his action.
- Cause and effect constitute one of the ways of saying this. Events in *The Old Man and the Medal* are human events i.e. they involve human responses to changing situations, including the possibility of action taken to change existing situations.

Fiction never deals with character in isolation, for what a man *is* determines what he does. Plot and character interpenetrate in a story. The plot of Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*, then, is character in action.

In writing your own story, you cannot therefore discuss plot without character, because constantly the perceptive reader will ask whether the actions performed in your story were:

- a) "In character" i.e. whether they were psychologically credible.

- b) Whether the actions performed were significant in terms of character

If the plot of your story exhibits logic and significance, it is telling your reader, or showing your audience, something about human nature and human conduct.

Satire, Irony and Paradox in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*

The reader likes to observe a story working itself out to unity just as he instinctively demands the following:

- the logic of cause and effect
- the logic of motivation
- the logic of theme

The story should be one in which the thematic structure in which all the various elements are tilted; in terms of which they achieve unity. If there is no satisfactorily developed theme, all the reader's interest, no matter how intense this may be, tends to evaporate.

In Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* (first published in French in 1979) we see how this reality is so compelling that it is often more clear to the reader than things he knows to be cold, hard facts. We discover that the privileged, the rich need the poor and the poor need the rich. Since Aminata Sow Fall's story possesses organic unity, all the elements have vital interrelations and thus have some bearing on the total significance of *The Beggars' Strike*.

Satire, irony, and paradox contribute to the total meaning of this novel. Mour Ndiaye, the Director of Public Health and Hygiene was charged with the responsibility of clearing the beggars off the streets of Dakar. He instructs his able assistant, Keba Dabo on the necessity of carrying out the government directives. Keba Dabo, a dedicated worker, approached this task with vigour and determination.

The Director insists on clearing the beggars when he thinks he does not need them but when he realizes he badly needs them in order to be Vice President, he simply cannot find them, and when he does find them in Niang's courtyard, under the able leadership of Nguirane Sarr and Salla Niang, they merely belittle him, laugh at him after taking his money. Mour Ndiaye therefore fails in his political ambition because of his success in carrying out a political assignment. Monsieur Toumane Sane, his adversary in the election wins, and is announced the Vice President.

The Beggars' Strike is built on irony, which starts with describing the beggars as "the parodies of human beings, these dregs of society" but rests on the conclusion of how begging affects the individual, particularly Mour Ndiaye who is at the centre of clearing the beggars off the streets.

The passage reflects the social and religious implications of begging:

Aminata Sow Fall: *The Beggars' Strike* (Extract)

All the beggars are afraid now. They are being ceaselessly hunted down without respite. They are afraid and they suffer physically, but that does not stop them from returning to their strategic points. Every morning they are drawn back as if by a magnet, armed only with the hope of being able to rely on the speed of their legs to escape from the stinging blows of policemen's batons, or of hiding in some nearby house when the round-up parties come by.

'But what's got into them all of a sudden? Why this sudden zeal?

'It's pure bloody-mindedness, that's all.'

They don't understand – and, what is more, who is there to tell them – that they constitute a canker

that must be hidden from sight. They have always considered themselves good citizens, practicing a trade like everyone else, and because of this they have never tried to define what links them specifically to society. According to them the contract that links every individual to society can be summed up in the words, giving and receiving. Well then, don't they, the poor, give their blessings, their prayers and their good wishes?

- (iii) *Satire* designates criticism of a person, human nature, events, social and political phenomena, or institutions. It may range from gentle needling to fierce bludgeoning of the target. Through the use of contrast, Aminata Sow Fall, in *The Beggars' Strike* has juxtaposed opposites ironically.

The instruction from the marabou Mour Ndiaye consulted is that he must give alms to the poor. These are the very wretched of the earth Mour Ndiaye has forced out of strategic locations in the city of Dakar. This is an irony of fate; Mour Ndiaye has waged war against Nguirane Sarr and his men and now to advance his political career he must depend on the beggars. At present power seems to be in the hands of the beggars and so Mour Ndiaye goes to them only to be rebuffed. His plan to have a city free of beggars back fires on his political ambitions.

In examining what idea, what feeling, what attitude is consistently developing throughout Aminata Sow Fall's story, we perceive irony, paradox, satire etc. as some of the major literary devices. Other literary devices used in *The Beggars' Strike* include proverbs, idioms, figures of speech etc.

Stock-Taking

General Points

- i) The passages from the African writers above represent eminent literary works widely available. Read them.
- ii) No matter how you communicate to the reader an awareness of the movement of time, you will use *suspense* to keep your readers interest during the progression of events. When this operates effectively as in Ferdinand Leopold Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*, Mariama Bâ's *So long a Letter* or in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*, the reader wants to know what will happen or what the results of events that occurred will be.
- iii) These authors have been successful because they explore the technique of foreshadowing by using details which suggest the ultimate outcome of the plot or which meaningfully predict the appearance of other details. It is therefore through a second reading of *The Beggars' Strike*, *The Old Man and the Medal*, *So long a Letter* or *Things Fall Apart* that you can fully come to terms with the excellencies of these artistic works, as well as see how you can apply the technique of foreshadowing in your own story. Its effectiveness will determine the full effect and thematic purpose of your story.
- iv) *Foreshadowing* is a technique which enables you to link elements in different parts of your story, in order to establish unity of structure.
- v) You could also interrupt the sequential flow of events through flashback, which entails a deliberate movement to events or scenes from an earlier time. Chinua Achebe and Ferdinand Leopold Oyono both use flashback as a vital part of structure. It demonstrates a sensible and artistic means of transition to and from the earlier events of their novels.

Plot, Theme, and Character

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe attempts to portray the beginning of the falling apart of the old and established order in the Igbo village. The events recounted in the plot take place between 1895 and 1905, when Europeans first came to that part of Nigeria. The image of the black personality, art, culture and tradition as the plot reveals becomes grossly distorted, and it will take over half a century before the Black man can talk boldly about the restoration and revival of his culture. The following passage from the novel reflects these cross-cultural conflicts.

Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart* (Extract)

Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the lowborn and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians. The white missionary was very proud of him and he was one of the first men in Umuofia to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, or Holy Feast as it was called in Ibo. Ogbuefi Ugonna had thought of the Feast in terms of eating and drinking, only more holy than the variety. He had therefore put his drinking-horn into his goatskin bag for the occasion.

But apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial. Many of these messengers came from Umuaru on the bank of the Great River, where the white men first came many years before and where they had built the centre of their religion and trade and government. These court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and

also arrogant and high-handed. They were called *Kotma*, and because of their ash-coloured shorts they earned the additional name of Ashy-Buttocks.

They guarded the prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law. Some of these prisoners had thrown away their twins and some had molested the Christians. They were beaten in the prison by the *Kotma* and made to work every morning clearing the government compound and fetching wood for the white Commissioner and the court messengers. Some of these prisoners were men of title who should be above such mean occupation. They were grieved by the indignity and mourned for their neglected farms. As they cut grass in the morning the younger men sang in tune with the strokes of their matchets:

Kotma of the ash buttocks
He is fit to be a slave
The white man has no sense,
He is fit to be a slave
The court messengers did not like to be called
Ashy-Buttocks, and they beat the men. But the
song spread in Umuofia.

Okonkwo's head was bowed in sadness as Obierika told him these things.

'Perhaps I have been away too long,' Okonkwo said, almost to himself. 'But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?'

'Have you not heard how the white man wiped out Abame?' asked Obierika.

'I have heard,' said Okonkwo. 'But I have also heard that Abame people were weak and foolish. Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and matchets? We would be cowards to compare

ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land.'

'It is already too late', said Obierika sadly. 'Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuaru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame.' He paused for a long time and then said, 'I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto.'

'What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?' asked Okonkwo.

'The white man's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter.'

'Does the white man understand our custom about land?'

'How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?'

'The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.' (123-125)

In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe tried to show the various aspects of cross-cultural conflicts that arose between the early colonizers who came to Igbo land and the Igbo people they met on arrival. The coming of the white man into the continent, therefore, did a lot of harm to the African continent. Although we now have education and modern civilization as a result of the coming of the white man, the coming indeed started according to E. N. Emenyonu and B.E.C. Oguzie a lot of cross-cultural conflicts which are still major problems facing Africans today as they seek to revive their traditional cultures (1-13).

(iv) Plot, then, is the soul of your story. It should exhibit logic and significance. Your plot should be telling your readers, or showing him/her something. And if your story is built using the traditional plot structure of the beginning, the middle, and the end, you must pay strict attention to the following characteristics:

- a) *The exposition*: This will imply that you give the reader the necessary information concerning your characters and events before the action proper of your story begins. It is from this “setting forth” that your story will develop. In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo was one of the most famous men in Umuofia before the coming of the Europeans. He was well known for his great courage, energy and physical strength. Early in his youth, he had thrown Amalinze the cat, the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. However, it is possible to see in the exposition that it is in these very virtues that the seeds of his eventual suicide are sown.
- b) *The complication*: The middle of your story, which must show the increasing difficulty encountered in the movement towards stability. It could result

to the point of highest tension i.e. *the climax* the point at which the forces in conflict reach the highest intensification; something happens; something cracks. It is possible to see in Okonkwo's suicide for example, the Whiteman's triumph in the destruction of the things that held African society together resulting to things, now falling apart. Your complication must therefore involve the interplay between *character* and *events*, which builds up the tension and develops the conflict out of the original situation given in your story. The interest in your story will inhere in the resistance encountered and overcome, or not overcome.

- c) *The dénouement*: It is the final solution or the untying of the plot. The strong points of Chinua Achebe's hero, Okonkwo, show that he had done certain things that he should not have done under normal circumstances. This is one of the reasons that things finally fell apart in *Things Fall Apart*. Your dénouement, it is expected, could, but not always coincide with the climax. Your story should give the reader the outcome of the conflict, the solution to the problem, the basis of a new stability. It should leave your reader with an attitude to take towards things in general.
- d) *Sub-plot*: It is a way in which you could interrupt the sequence of your plotline by emphasizing a different series of events involving other characters. In Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* for instance, it was at the peak of Mour Ndiaye's successful career, at a time he expected to be the Vice President that he announced to his wife, Lolli that he was being "given a new wife tomorrow"

(*The Beggars' Strike* 28); Sine, who smoked cigarettes and wore tight trousers. The sub-plot heightens the domestic conflict in Mour Ndiaye's Muslim home. Thus, in your own story your sub-plot should emphasize conflict on a lower level in an effective manner thereby lending coherence to your story. Always remember that your sub-plot should in some way relate to or comment upon the main plot.

- (v) In writing, your language should be elegant and the experience of your characters narrated in a simple vivid flowing prose through which images of reality are drawn. There should be controlled use of words. For example, in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, language is cryptic and very economically used. It approaches the language of poetry in its terseness. So, pay attention to language for the vivid portrayal of character.

Fiction deals with a world of credible human beings. Character is important to fiction and one way to approach the basic pattern of a story is to ask as in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, whose story is it? Okonkwo's of course.

- The motives and actions of your characters must be rendered coherent
- Fiction is a world that is diverse and varied. Your selection of modes of character will depend upon a number of things. Your decision on when to summarize traits or events, when you decide to describe directly, or when – again as in Chinua Achebe – you allow the character to express his feelings through dialogue and action.

How successful your story is developed from a beginning, through a complicating middle, to an inevitable end will be determined in the way in which you draw your characters.

It would be recalled that in *So Long a Letter*, Modou Fall did everything possible to marry Ramatoulaye in spite of her mother's opposition. Again, it should be noted that both the African tradition and Moslem religion sanction polygamy but to Ramatoulaye, it was a calculated betrayal of her trust and a brutal rejection of their life together. Her friend, Aissatou, is perhaps luckier. The husband, Mawdo Ba, was the son of a princess but married her despite his mother's opposition. In these instances *contrast* has been an effective device in delineating character.

On the other hand, in those days when courage and bravery were very much emphasized, Okonkwo's father, Unoka, had not the spirit of the age. He feared war, was afraid of bloodshed, and always recoiled at the mention of warfare. Through a summary of Unoka's traits or events that characterized his life, vividness is achieved in *Things Fall Apart*.

The theme of your story is the idea, the significance, the interpretation of persons and events. In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo's death serves to illustrate the bitter experiences which resulted from the harshness and high handedness of the early Europeans over the Africans. Okonkwo has brought home human heads and was a titled man who was respected everywhere. It is possible to see in his suicide, the Whiteman's triumph in the massacre of the African's cultures, tradition and customs.

Aminata Sow Fall makes *The Beggars' Strike* seem like a comic story; light hearted and less serious. But when the reader considers Mour Ndiaye and his family and their ambition, their failure is attendant with anguish and distress and so tragic. There is therefore the combination of the comic and serious aspects of the human predicament in *The Beggars' Strike* especially from the point of view of character delineation (see above) and theme.

- *Theme* is what your reader is to make of the human experience embodied in the total narrative.
- *Theme* is the pervasive and unifying value of life in your story. If there is no theme, there is no story. There must therefore be logic of theme in your story in which your reader feels that things have worked themselves out to that moment of significant stability, a thematic structure into which the various elements are tilting.

Section Three

Guidepost to the Art of Playwriting

Preface

Your main concern as a playwright is to *dramatize* a story; to transform into action a conversation; dramatic characters that represent human concerns. Since a play is conveyed by a plot, the problem of perspective is therefore unique for you as a playwright. Perspective in your play is derived from the events, the conflicts and the characters involved in them, all of which should be conveyed by the dialogue and non-verbal action(s) of your characters.

The preoccupations of men and women, for better or worse, must be the centre of your dramatic universe. Since people often define themselves by the way they handle challenge and response to life; it is their hopes, their fears, and their foibles that must become the focus of your artistic vision. And, because this section (Guidepost to the Art of Playwriting) is intended to emphasize an intellectual response to the art of drama, it may be wise to summarize the basic principles related to this approach i.e. Questions that represent the fundamental aspects of the play you write should involve the following:

- i) What happens in your play?
- ii) Who does it?
- iii) What does your play mean?

In more technical terms in order to provide organic unity to your play, you must pay attention to the following:

- PLOT
- CHARACTER
- THEME

Once you have developed a subject, you have to decide what aspects of people and their concerns to write about, be it history, biography, a personal crisis, national unity, and so on. Your focus as a playwright must always be on human beings; human concerns.

When you Write your Play

Unlike in the art of poetry (*Section One*) or guidepost to prose fiction (*Section Two*) the playwright must be the most objective and has to put the most distance between himself and his created characters. So, when you write your play, it should usually begin with an imbalance of forces or a loss of equilibrium; this propels your characters to action. Although you cannot really intrude as if you were an omniscient author (again see *Section Two*), your approach and your material do give clues to your perspective.

As your play progresses, your characters meet a series of complications as they attempt to fulfil their objectives or realize their goals. Occasionally you may create a narrator whose mind and personality may impact on the dramatic plot and on the other characters.

It is through the series of complications or encounters that the tensions or conflict are produced in your play. However, your play might emphasize.

- a) *character*
- b) *theme*
- c) *plot*

It is therefore most essential that your play develop organic unity [see sections (i) & (ii) of this volume].

Declaration of Purpose

The general pervasive feeling aroused by various factors in your play, such as tone, setting, character, plot, and the like; the general effect of the handling of the total work

constitutes the atmosphere of your play. This must demonstrate vividness and significance, which must be felt to really inhere in the action.

The vivid detail that catches the imagination of your reader or audience in which the reader recognizes unity and significance must help to create the special quality of your play. For, when the perceptive reader watches or reads your play he is faced by the following questions:

- i) Why was this particular thing selected?
- ii) What has led the playwright (you) to use these facts and reject others?
- iii) How would the choice of other available facts have made your play different in terms of plot, character and theme?

Besides, your play must demonstrate the power to engage your audience's interest and excite his feelings, not by reason of the particular elements that enter into it, but by reason of their inter-relations, such as in the plays that we will discuss:

- Bole Butake's *The Rape of Michelle* (1984)
- Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1982)
- Kole Omotoso's *The Curse: A One Act Play* (1976)

Questions on Artistic Vision

In the plot, the reader should recognize a movement toward a point of rest, of resolution since what constitutes an action always depends upon the perspective from which the audience views the events involved. There must be order. It represents the treatment you make of the events of the actions of characters.

To therefore determine artistic vision, the following questions will help your audience to link your play to the historical and contemporary events in your society:

- i) Who do you write your plays for?
- ii) Why do you write plays or create the way you do?
- iii) What issues are addressed in your plays?
- iv) What attitude do you take to issues raised in your play?

There must be logic in your play. This involves a beginning, a middle and an end. This would enable your reader determine whether:

- a) the use of language
- b) the themes
- c) the visual and invocative images which inform the social universe of your play is:
 - socialist as in Kole Omotoso's *The Curse A One Act Play*
 - reformist as in Bole Butake's *The Rape of Michelle*
 - classical realist as in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Bole Butake's *The Rape of Michelle*

The play deals with the purported rape and thus sexual defilement of a teenager, Michelle Fokam, by the 28 year old schoolmaster, Teacher Mikindong, of Government Secondary School, Osse. For this indiscretion Michelle's mother, Rufina, uses her connection with the Police Commissioner to exact the stiffest punishment. In spite of efforts by the practical and brilliant defence counsel, Barrister Zende, Teacher Mikindong is not only remanded in police custody but is refused bail. He is further extorted by the police while he is in detention. The ironical

implications of the play's title where Michelle is not raped but in conjunction with her mother wants to rape Mikindong, the latter's undue incarceration and reduction to bribery of the police force foregrounds Butake's depiction of a lawless and orderless society permeated at all levels by immorality and demonstrates how crucial diction is in writing.

Excerpt from Bole Butake's *The Rape of Michelle* (1984)

Scene III

Following Day. Police cell as in Scene II. Mikindong is wearing the pullover and socks brought by his wife the previous day. He is sitting on a thin mattress on which there is a folded blanket. He is fairly composed. The door opens and the Policeman enters.

Policeman

Teacher, I am sure that you had a good sleep.

Mikindong

Yes, I slept well. You people are very kind.

Policeman

I told your wife that everything depended on her. And she did her duty. And now you are happy. And we are happy. That is how life should be. You make me happy. I make you happy. One hand washing the other. And that is how things should be.

Mikindong

Again I say thank you. If I ever get out of this thing I will be able to show real gratitude to you.

Policeman

Is it true that the case is coming up soon?

Mikindong

I am hoping so, but one can never tell. Money can turn the scales; especially as you say her mother is always in the Commissioner's office.

Policeman

Don't mind the foolish woman. She thinks it is the Commissioner who does the work here? When are you going to court?

Voice

Offstage Brigadier, the man's lawyer is here.

Policeman

I am coming.

Exits and returns immediately with Zende, the lawyer

Zende

Good morning, Mr. Mikindong. I hope you had a good rest. *They shake hands* I see they are not treating you badly at all.

Mikindong

They are very kind people.

Zende

Yes, they usually are. When they want to.

Policeman

Don't mind the lies people tell about the police. We are not beasts but human beings. But we too must eat.

Zende

O.K. *Giving him some money* Go and buy yourself a packet of cigarettes.

Policeman

I am doing this only for you. You know what the regulation here is. I am doing this for your sake only.

Zende

Thank you so much for being so considerate.

Policeman

Examining the money We don't smoke. And this money cannot even buy a bottle of red wine. There are three other policemen outside. You saw them yourself.

Zende

O.K. *Gives him more money* Go and have your drink. And thanks for co-operation. My client, the teacher, will never forget you. *Exit policeman*

Mikindong

I don't know how to thank you for all the trouble.

Zende

Part of the profession. We are in court the day after tomorrow. Cost me thirty thousand francs to the Registrar.

Mikindong

My wife told me so.

Zende

Did you do it?

Mikindong

No. I did nothing to her.

Zende

Now, you better tell me the truth. Unless I know the truth I cannot help you. We are not in court yet, remember.

Mikindong

I did nothing to her. If I had done it, I would not be here now.

Zende

Where would you be?

Mikindong

At home. In the comfort of my home.

Zende

Your fortune is hanging in a balance. The minimum sentence for rape is seven years; and you are telling me that you are here because you didn't rape her?

Mikindong

She was the one who wanted to rape me!

Zende

Mr. Mikindong, I am a very busy man. Stop wasting my time and tell me the truth.

Mikindong

I have told you the truth.

Zende

What about the medical certificate? What do you say to that?

Mikindong

You know yourself that money can fetch anything. That certificate was bought.

Zende

And the girl's screams? And the witnesses? What do you say to that?

Mikindong

That is the part of the story, which I still don't understand. Her screams. She must have felt insulted.

Zende

You mean she offered herself and you refused to take her?

Mikindong

Exactly so.

Zende

What about the witnesses? Her mother, she wants to see you in jail.

Mikindong

That is another story. She too offered herself; but I wouldn't take her.

Zende

You mean she is so hot after you because you rejected both she and her daughter?

Mikindong

Yes.

Zende

What are we going to say in court? Who will believe your story with all the evidence they have?

Mikindong

You know yourself that the law is what it is. Many innocent people get convicted while criminals go scot-free. All I ask of you is to make contacts with the presiding magistrate. I know he would like an envelope. My wife has promised to see him.

Zende

I agree with you. It is a question of seeing people. Luckily for you the magistrate is a personal friend of mine. We are on very good terms. But the prosecutor, Traisel, is a beast. As far as he is concerned you are already a criminal and condemned. I wonder how much money she gave him.

Mikindong

One hundred thousand. That's what my wife said.

Policeman

Offstage Do you want me to be dismissed? *Enters* What are you still doing here?

Zende

You have been very kind. I am through with him. *Turning to Mikindong* Remember the game is yours to play.

Mikindong

I will remember. But remember your own role. Contacts.

Policeman

That is the right word. Contacts. A telephone call from above to the magistrate! An envelope from below to the magistrate! And the deed is done. The case is closed or simply thrown out of the courts. Contacts.

Zende

I see you are a very practical philosopher.

Policeman

Oh yes! We must be practical and realistic. You think the magistrate eats truth? You think the prosecutor eats truth? You think *lowers his voice* the commissioner eats truth? Nobody eats truth. But people need a drink now and again. They need money to do things. That is what I call practical philosophy.

Zende

More grease to your practical philosophy. *To Mikindong* I'll see you in court.

Exits

Policeman

Teacher, let me tell you something. Whether you did it or not does not really matter. If you do not make contacts you are going to stay in prison for a good part of your only life. And what will happen to your beautiful wife and your work? She will become the woman of some powerful man. But with money... you can move mountains.

Mikindong

Thank you so much for the advice. But how am I to get the money? That is why I wanted bail.

Policeman

Do not ask me. You are even lucky that you have such a beautiful wife. She will get the money for you. But, tell me, why did you do it?

Mikindong

Are you at it again? Leave me alone. If you want to know why I did it, wait till we get to court.

Policeman

I will wait.

Voice

Offstage Brigadier, the Commissioner wants you in his office.

Policeman

Coming! *To Mikindong* I will come back later.

Exits

Mikindong

Good riddance. (16-22)

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a play most concerned with metaphysics, with continuity and the issues of life and death as they affect the communal psyche. The *plot* explores the ritual Yoruba suicide of the Master of the Horse for the Alafin of Oyo halted by a British colonial District Officer. The chief courtier of the Alafin, Elesin Oba, is required by custom to die and thus accompany the King on his way to the spiritual world. At the height of his

dance around the town of Oyo, Elesin decides to marry a virgin girl and so blends funeral drums with wedding celebrations.

Having yielded to the flesh, Elesin's will is sapped and he bungles his role by allowing his sensuality to weaken his spiritual resolution and therefore being unable to die by an act of choice. The result is tragedy for the Yoruba community.

Earlier, before the passage excerpted below, Soyinka, is concerned to emphasize that the ritual practice in Oyo in 1946 is not more barbaric than the Second World War which Olunde, Elesin's son, experiences in 1944 when this play is set. This is the subject of the discussion between Olunde and Jane Pilkings when he compares the captain's self-sacrifice with Elesin's ritual sacrifice. Transition as the major pre-occupation of *Death and the King's Horseman* is embodied in the tragedy of Elesin Oba.

Soyinka insists on pointing out in this play that western philosophy is not necessarily better than traditional African worldview. In the dialogue between Pilkings and Elesin Oba, two views of the world are contrasted.

Excerpt from Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1982)

Pilkings

Do you know what she is talking about?

Elesin

Go to the gates, ghostly one. Whatever you find there bring it to me.

Iyaloja

Not yet. It drags behind me on the slow, weary feet of women. Slow as it is Elesin, it has long overtaken you. It rides ahead of your laggard will.

Pilkings

What is she saying now? Christ! Must your people forever speak in riddles?

Elesin

It will come white man, it will come. Tell your men at the gates to let it through.

Pilkings

(dubiously)

I'll have to see what it is.

Iyaloja

You will. *(Passionately)* But this is one oath he cannot shirk. White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming restlessly on the surface of earth? Would you bury him here among those you consider less than human? In your land have you no ceremonies of the dead?

Pilkings

Yes. But we don't make our chiefs commit suicide to keep him company.

Iyaloja

Child, I have not come to help your understanding. *(Points to ELESIN.)* This is the man whose weakened understanding holds us in bondage to you. But ask him if you wish. He knows the meaning of a king's passage; he was not born yesterday. He knows the peril to the race when our dead father, who goes as intermediary, waits and waits and knows he is betrayed. He knows when the narrow gate was opened and he knows it will not stay for laggards who drag their feet in dung and vomit, whose lips are reeking of the left-overs of lesser men. He knows he has condemned our king to wander in the void of evil with beings who are enemies of life.

Pilkings

Yes er... but look here...

Iyaloja

What we ask is little enough. Let him release our King so he can ride on homewards alone. The messenger is on his way on the backs of women. Let him send word through

the heart that is folded up within the bolt. It is the least
of all his oaths, it is the easiest fulfilled.

(The AIDE-DE-CAMP runs in.)

Pilking

Bob?

Aide-de-Camp

Sir, there's a group of women chanting up the hill.

Pilking

(rounding on IYALOLA)

If you people want trouble...

Jane

Simon, I think that's what Olunde referred to in his letter.

Pilking

He knows damned well I can't have a crowd here! Damn it, I explained the delicacy of my position to him. I think it's about time I got him out of town. Bob, send a car and two or three soldiers to bring him in. I think the sooner he takes his leave of his father and gets out the better.

Iyalola

Save your labour white one. If it is the father of your prisoner you want, Olunde, he who until this night we knew as Elesin's son, he comes soon himself to take his leave. He has sent the women ahead, so let them in.

(PILKING remains undecided.)

Aide-de-Camp

What do we do about the invasion? We can still stop them from here.

Pilking

What do they look like?

Aide-de-Camp

They're not many. And they seem quite peaceful.

Pilking

No men?

Aide-de-Camp

Mm, two or three at the most.

Jane

Honestly, Simon, I'd trust Olunde. I don't think he'll deceive you about their intentions.

Pilkings

He'd better not. Alright, let them in Bob. Warn them to control themselves. Then hurry Olunde here. Make sure he brings his baggage because I'm not returning him into town.

Aide-de-Camp

Very good sir. (*Goes.*)

Pilkings

(*to IYALOJA*)

I hope you understand that if anything goes wrong it will be on your head. My men have orders to shoot at the first sign of trouble.

Iyaloja

To prevent one death you will actually make other deaths? Ah, great is the wisdom of the white race. But have no fear. Your Prince will sleep peacefully. So at long last will ours. We will disturb you no further, servant of the white king. Just let Elesin fulfil his oath and we will retire home and pay homage to our King.

Jane

I believe her Simon, don't you?

Pilkings

Maybe.

Elesin

Have no fear ghostly one. I have a message to send my King and then you have nothing more to fear.

Pilkings

Olunde would have done it. The chiefs asked him to speak the words but he said no, not while you lived.

Elesin

Even from the depths to which my spirit has sunk, I find some joy that this little has been left to me.

(The women enter, intoning the dirge 'Ale, le, le,' and swaying from side to side. On their shoulders is borne a longish object roughly like a cylindrical bolt, covered in cloth. They set it down on the spot where IYALOJA had stood earlier, and form a semi-circle round it. The PRAISE-SINGER and DRUMMER stand on the inside of the semi-circle but the drum is not used at all. The DRUMMER intones under the PRAISE-Singer's invocations).

Pilking

(as they enter)

What is *that*?

Iyaloja

The burden you have made white one, but we bring it in peace.

Pilking

I said *what* is it?

Elesin

White man, you must let me out. I have a duty to perform.

Pilking

I most certainly will not.

Elesin

There lies the courier of my King. Let me out so I can perform what is demanded of me.

Pilking

You'll do what you need to do from inside there or not at all. I've gone as far as I intend to with this business.

Elesin

The worshipper who lights a candle in your church to bear a message to his god bows his head and speaks in a whisper to the flame. Have I not seen it ghostly one? His voice does not ring out to the world. Mine are no words for anyone's ears. They are not words even for the bearers of this load. They are words I must speak secretly, even as my father whispered them in my ears and I in the ears of my first-born. I cannot shout them to the wind and the open night-sky.

Jane

Simon ...

Pilking

Don't interfere. Please!

Iyaloja

They have slain the favourite horse of the king and slain his dog. They have borne them from pulse to pulse centre of the land receiving prayers for their king. But the rider has chosen to stay behind. Is it too much to ask that he speak his heart to heart of the waiting courier? (*PILKINGS turns his back on her.*) So be it. Elesin Oba you see how even the mere leavings are denied you. (*She gestures to the PRAISE-SINGER.*)

Praise-Singer

Elesin Oba! I call you by that name only this last time. Remember when I said, if you cannot come, tell my horse. (*Pause.*) What? I cannot hear you? I said, if you cannot come, whisper in the ears of my horse. Is your tongue severed from the roots Elesin? I can hear no response. I said, if there are boulders you cannot climb, mount my horse's back, this spotless black stallion, he'll bring you over them. (*Pauses.*) Elesin Oba, once you had a tongue that darted like a drummer's stick. I said, if you get lost my dog will track a path to me. My memory fails me but I think you replied: My feet have found the path, Alafin.

(The dirge rises and falls)

I said at the last, if evil hands hold you back, just tell my horse there is weight on the hem of your smock. I dare not wait too long.

(The dirge rises and falls)

There lies the swiftest ever messenger of a king, so set me free with the errand of your heart. There lie the head and heart of the favourite of the gods, whisper in his ears. Oh my companion, if you had followed when you should, we would not say that the horse preceded its rider. If you had followed when it was time, we would not say the dog has raced beyond and left his master behind. If you had raised your will to cut the thread of life at the summons of the

drums, we would not say your mere shadow fell across the gateway and took its owner's place at the banquet. But the hunter, laden with a slain buffalo, stayed to root in the cricket's hole with his toes. What now is left? If there is a dearth of bats, the pigeon must serve us for the offering. Speak the words over your shadow, which must now serve in your place.

Elesin

I cannot approach. Take off the cloth. I shall speak my message from heart to heart of silence.

Iyaloja

(moves forward and removes the covering)

Your courier Elesin, cast your eyes on the favoured companion of the King.

(Rolled up in the mat, his head and feet showing at either end is the body of OLUNDE.)

There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums.

Praise-Singer

Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness – you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin.

(ELESIN has stood rock-still, his knuckles taut on the bars, his eyes glued to the body of his son. The stillness seizes and paralyzes everyone, including PILKINGS who has turned to look. Suddenly ELESIN flings one arm round his neck, once, and with the loop of

the chain, strangles himself in a swift, decisive pull. The guards rush forward to stop him but they are only in time to let his body down. PILKINGS has leapt to the door at the same time and struggles with the lock. He rushes within, fumbles with the handcuffs and unlocks them, raises the body to a sitting position while he tries to give resuscitation. The women continue their dirge, unmoved by the sudden event.)

Iyaloja

Why do you strain yourself? Why do you labour at tasks for which no one, not even the man lying there would give you thanks? He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung.

Pilkings

(in a tired voice)

Was this what you wanted?

Iyaloja

No child, it is what you brought to be, you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you. The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride. There is your board, filled to overflowing. Feast on it. *(she screams at him suddenly, seeing that PILKINGS is about to close Elesin's staring eyes.)* Let him alone! However sunk he was in debt he is no pauper's carrion abandoned on the road. Since when have strangers donned cloths of indigo before the bereaved cries out his loss?

(She turns to the BRIDE who has remained motionless throughout.)

Child.

(The girl takes up a little earth, walks calmly into the cell and closes Elesin's eyes. She then pours some earth over each eyelid and comes out again.)

Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn.

(She goes off, accompanied by the BRIDE. The dirge rises in volume and the women continue their sway. Lights fade to a black-out.) (71-76)

Kole Omotoso's *The Curse: A One Act Play* (1976)

In *The Curse: A One Act Play* the main character, Chief the Hon. Alagba, the arrogant, selfish, mean and cruel despot of two servants; the violent-prone Moyegun and the lustful Gbolaro, decides, to lock them up in a cage before proceeding on a business trip abroad. The chief imprisons his two servants in a cage in a bid to prevent them from having access either to his fleet of cars or his three mistresses whom Gbolaro eyes with lust.

Moyegun in the course of the play would later kill Chief Alagba his master and his erstwhile serving colleague Gbolaro, in order to inherit the property, mistresses and phony mannerisms of Chief the Honourable. Omotoso's *The Curse* then ends where it begins. Professional praise singers and drummers who praised Chief the Hon. Alagba to his doom return to sing the praise of his servant Moyegun who now owns the money, the women and material goods.

In *The Curse*, Omotoso goes on to show the tendency of material objects dominating human concerns in a society like Nigeria where the practice of capitalism is shallow and crude. Both Chief the Hon. Alagba, and later his servant Moyegun who replaces him as the oppressor are prepared to sacrifice humanity to material excesses. Moral and professional ethics are shown as having given way to the worship of money and property.

Excerpt from Kole Omotoso's *The Curse: A One Act Play*

Scene 1

Even before the curtain opens the audience has been treated to encomiums from three or four drummers on the talking drum. This drumming follows a spell of apala music.

The drummers are saying:

Baba ni baba nje,
Baba ni baba nje
O ba takiti ko f'oriso
Baba ni baba nje

A rich man is always a rich man
A rich man is always a rich man
You can somersault
And break your neck
A rich man is always a rich man

The man with the sekere does a solo:

Sekere ni mi. se e ngbo
Sekere ni mi ni mi ni mo wi
Ti o ba fowo han mi,
Wa r'emi mi pa?

I am sekere, are you listening
I am sekere, I am I said
Show me some money
And you can buy me heart and all?

When the curtain finally opens, we see a flashily furnished sitting room. The vulgarity of the sitting room is signified most eloquently by the gold rust finish of almost all the furniture. The sitting room is

also very highly mechanized boasting a huge television set, as huge as the director can imagine. There is a gold-finish radiogram. The radio is playing while the television is also on. There is a row of telephones, not together on one table, but dotted rather all over the room. They are all gold-coloured. As well as the radiogram and the hugest television set ever seen in Nigeria, there is a record player with four huge bull dog amplifiers located at the four corners of the sitting room. Chief (ex-Hon) Alagba is seated centre of stage, smoking a timber size cigar. He is obviously having problems curling his two lips around the end of the cigar. So he holds it most of the time, only tentatively attempting to smoke it. He is dressed for a relaxed evening at home, wearing a gold-laced dansiki and soro. There is a singularly vulgar ring, huge in contrast to his little finger on which the ring is enforced. Between attempting to smoke his cigar and rubbing the ring on his knee, he keeps himself occupied while he is not talking: he is about 45 years of age, very short, barely five feet. All through the scene he does not attempt to stand up and when forced to stand, we notice that he is wearing platform shoes. The drummers are repeating their Baba in baba nje again while the sekere man is about to start his own song. There is no household as such here. Doors lead out of the sitting room to other living rooms in the house. There are three women lying around lazily on the chairs. They at no time contribute to the conversation. They too are dressed in clothes of rusted gold and as much part of the decor as the chairs on which they lie. From time to time two servants come and go serving one or the other of them. As soon as the drummers finish their repetition of their praise song: Chief Alagba asks:

Chief Alagba

And is that all you have? Is that all you have been able to sweat out in my praise? Is it so difficult to praise me that you cannot even fill the flip side of a record with my praise?" Baba ni baba nje, baba ni baba nje." Shio!!! What do you expect a rich man to be? Why don't you say "Baba ni yeye nje?" is that all?

Onilu

Praise deserved is best paid with silence Alagba, Chief Honourable. Silence in awe and respect is the best praise. But drummers must eat, clothe themselves and their families, take cover under a roof. Silence does not provide these things, these realities of life. Only Chief Alagba, only the reputation of Chief Alagba forces us, only the praise of Chief Alagba compels us to break the silence.

Chief Alagba

What about the realities of life you mentioned?

Onilu

Any other sweating would do. But if I am to be a praise singer, I would sing a little, be silent a little.

(The drummer drums and sings:)

Oloye Alagba
Omode awon agba
Oloye Alagba
Agba awon omode

Chief Alagba
Child among adults
Chief Alagba
Adult among children

(He falls silent.)

Chief Alagba

(breaks the silence) You see, everybody is going to sleep. Praise singing, my dear Onilu, and I do not presume to teach you your job, must be continuously refurbished. There is no room for silence. Let me show you how praise should be song.
(he presses a table bell twice with a long pause in between; Gbolaro enters.)

Chief Alagba

Gbolaro, bring my record and play it.
(While Gbolaro is fiddling with the sound system)

Chief Alagba

Onilu, here is something for your sweat and nothing for your silence.

(The record begins to play. Main part of this song is still to be supplied. The last part says in a sudden change of melody from wild juju dancing melody to a tune reminiscent of a church hymn)

Onidotin e bu s'ayo
Ojo nla l'eyi fun yin
Se idotin ko matter
Ara nikan l'on ba wi

Wallowers in filth rejoice!
This is a great day for you!
Filth does not matter
It harms only the body

Chief Alagba

(presses the table bell in two quick bursts) (Moyegun comes in.)
Stop that record. Stop it. You do know that I do not like that part of it. Why don't you people ever think?
(Moyegun stops the record and disappears.)

Chief Alagba

Goodbye my friends. Thank you for your company.
(The drummers and their groups, feeling unwanted, start to leave. As they go out they beat their drums desultorily, more as a mark of their own personal assertion than in an attempt to revive their praise singing of Alagba. When they have all left, one person remains standing, bent forward to present a huge envelope in his proffered hands to Chief Alagba. In fact he had been there for some time and all his attempts to attract the attention of Chief Alagba had failed.)

Chief Alagba

What are you waiting for? I said go away! I have had enough praise for one day, okay?
(The man waiting is in an Airways outfit, green trousers and white shirt and a green tie.)

Airwaysman

I have a message for you sir.

(Chief Alagba is inspecting his ring all this time and rubbing it against his knee. When he is not doing this, he is attempting to relight his cigar, which had gone out long ago. He does not take any notice of the Airways Man.)

Chief Alagba

You have a message for me?

Airwaysman

Yes sir.

Chief Alagba

Go and wax it on a record, okay?

(The man is perplexed and looks towards the girls as if for some help. They look at him in turn and resume their decor postures.)

Airwaysman

From the Airways sir ...

(Chief Alagba turns round with dignity and faces the Airways Man.)

Chief Alagba

Why didn't you say it was you?

Airwaysman

I am sorry sir.

Chief Alagba

You must always say it is you, okay?

Airwaysman

Yessir.

(Chief Alagba takes a long cane lying by his side and swishes in the direction of one of the girls. She gets up, receives the packet from the Airways Man and kneeling down gives it to Chief Alagba. When he has received it, she goes back to her lying down. Chief Alagba checks through all the documents, which have been handed over to him. They are a bulky air).

(1-5)

Further Notes on Democratic Style and Structure

- i) Every play like every work of art has a framework. Each play you write must have its internal laws and its own framework, which gives it shape, strength and meaning. Without structure, your play falls apart no matter how stimulating a performance on stage it might be.
- ii) You must take to heart that the uniqueness of a play as a performed literary art requires that you look at the discussions on style and particularly structure, in Sections I & II, since some of the facets of structure in fiction are also relevant to the play.
- iii) Your play should portray every conceivable human action, thought, attitude, emotion, situation, or problem. It is the art of creating fictional characters in words that give them human identity. It is an art of illusion whereby the characters created seem to become people with traits and personalities which a reader recognizes, responds to and analyzes. Conflict is therefore an essential tool for playwriting. By its very nature it suggests contrast, and it is more vital to drama. For without conflict your play does not exist.
- iv) Creating the plot is your responsibility as a playwright. There must be a pattern or organization that must remain true to itself. The dramatic structure and the plot of Kole Omotoso's *The Curse* bring to the fore the greed, avarice as well as the love for property and the desire to monopolize and preserve it. Thus, in concerning yourself with human beings and the human condition, your setting and point of view are important in your delineation of character. It is your duty as a playwright to decide at what point in the story your plot will begin, which characters will participate, and in what sequence they will occur.

- v) Dialogue can establish distinctions among your characters and reveal a great deal about their traits, occupations or social status. The dialogue spoken by your characters should represent your style created to suit the particular people and circumstances of your play. In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Olunde renounces his father and chooses to die so as to restore harmony in the Yoruba community. He performs the ritual death to reintegrate the spiritual existence of the race as well as to make up for the blemish his father has put on his lineage.

The dialogue of your play then should serve a vital function. Whereas in prose fiction (See Section II above) the plot is told, in the play it develops before the eyes and ears of an audience with what has been described as a sense of "now-ness."

- vi) To convey the psychological nuances of character, you may create a scene-within-a-scene, equivalent to a flashback in prose fiction. Sometimes to reveal the inner life of your characters you may frequently have to use artificial means such as *the Aside* which is an interruption in the dialogue during which the character says what he really thinks but addresses his remarks to the audience and not to the character he has been talking to.
- vii) Besides *Soliloquy* which is a passage spoken by a character when he is alone and speaks to himself but in effect addresses the audience and thereby reveals his thoughts, feelings or frustrations, you may resort, as Butake does in *The Rape of Michelle* to explore language for purposes of character delineation. The language of *The Rape of Michelle* can be seen at three levels i.e. from the high flown, grand and hieratic and formal style of the Magistrate and the men at court.

Magistrate

If defence counsel doubts the authenticity and validity of the medical certificate then we will have the medical officer who issued the certificate into the witness box... In the light of the evidence before this court, I hereby order his immediate release on bail (*TROM*. p. 38)

The above can be contrasted to the base, plain demotic patois of Michelle

... he take me over to the long chair
and start to rub his body against
my body... then he start to remove
“my dross” and when I refuse he
slap and throw me on the ground
(*TROM*. p. 27)

There is a middle ground of expression shared by Mikindong, Akwen, Eno, Traisel and Ngege as well as the out of court almost colloquial idiom of Barrister Zende at Rufina’s haunts with his reply to Michelle, “For sure! For sure!” (*TROM*. p. 37) a language register he would not dare use at court. The level of language use is appropriate to the speaker and the occasion in Butake’s *The Rape of Michelle*.

viii) The form of your play should act as handmaiden to content, and vice versa. In terms of its form, aesthetics and subject matter, Omotoso’s *The Curse* aims at a popular, political theatre to conscientize Nigeria and Africa’s wretched of the earth for a mass social, continental revolution.

Afterword

Conclusions like introductions are not the easiest things to write. But conclude one must. I want in this conclusion to touch on a subject or aspect of writing on which we have not consciously focused; myths and their importance on our lives. Myths and or mythology are the stories we build around us – these are the explanations our forebears gave to happenings/ occurrences just like the Greeks formulated of their gods and produced The Olympians. These gods are immortal men and examples such as Homer's *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Sophocles' *King Oedipus* all portray the communion between gods and men but also diffuse creation stories as in *The Holy Bible*. Africa too has its creation myths, its heroes such as Chaka "Zulu King and Warrior" (1786-1828), Queen Hatshepsut (1500 B.C.), Hannibal of Carthage (247-183 B.C.), Makeda "The Queen of Sheba" (960 B.C.), Ann Nzinga "Queen of Ndongo" (1582-1663) and Sundiata of Mali (ruled from 1230 – 1255 AD).

These myths depict and explain a way of life and a people. Can you imagine therefore my consternation when I turn to students in my literature class to ask for a version of the creation myth from their tribe/clan and I am met with a blank face? It is incumbent on me to try to explain to these students how important myths are and how they enable the individual to root/ground herself; how connections can be made or drawn between different mythologies; how our every day experience informs and guides us; the importance of symbols and imagery in our lives. These things do not appear only in western literature. They are the palm wine with which as Achebe puts it words are eaten in African literature. So, I emphasize how important observation and reading are; one needs to read as widely as possible to be

better informed about the world in which one lives. Let us take the well-known *King Oedipus* story of Sophocles and its place in literature. Its impact is immeasurable. From it Freud and other psychoanalysts have derived the Oedipus complex to postulate an explanation for a son's attitude towards the father. On the other hand, let us take the more familiar Buea Mountain or Mount Cameroon which continues to tease the imagination and so can be compared to the flirtatious lady draped in layers of veils which she will lift at unexpected moments to allow only a peek, then at other times, stand completely revealed in all her rich and luscious nudity.

In our attempt to help the prospective writer muster confidence we have been not only as eclectic as possible in our choices in author and material but as encompassing as we could to ensure a wide and varied range of examples to build on and that the aspiring writer navigate her imagination while coaxing the creative spirit to light.

Two recent events in Buea serve us well at this point: One is the first ever black tie dinner dance organized by EduArt Foundation on 18 July 2008 to recognize Anglophone writers; the other a three day student training workshop from 22 – 25 July 2008 on the writing of poetry and the short story for aspiring writers from all six state universities at the University of Buea organized by the Ministry of Higher Education under the auspices of UNIFAC (University Festival of Arts and Culture).

Present at the first event was Niji Osundare, the Nigerian poet now teaching in New Orleans, who had written the introduction to *Their Champagne Party Will End*, a collection of poems in honour of Bate Besong. He had taught Besong at the University of Ibadan, and recalled that even before their first encounter he had through the literati grapevine already heard of Besong. One fine day he came out of class to find Besong awaiting him. The latter introduced himself

by way of presenting him with some of his poems for perusal. When he saw Besong later, Osundare asked him where he got all the big words from and the latter responded with something like the “**Advanced Advanced Learners Dictionary.**” My intention in telling this story is not to encourage everyone to aspire to write in the manner of Bate Besong. I raise it to emphasize the importance of words and their meanings in our lives to a generation which is unfortunately caught in the web of cutting edge technology like the internet superhighway, podcast, instant replay of live events occurring thousands of miles away on television, cell-phone technology in dark enclaves of villages where basic facilities for human survival are absent, etc. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm acknowledges that while on the street he was the most articulate conman around. However, in prison, he would find he could not express himself on paper using street slang. But he learned to improve his vocabulary and his penmanship:

I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know *which* words I needed to learn. Finally just to start some kind of action, I began copying. [...]

I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. [...]

I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words – immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort I could also remember what many of those words meant. [...]

I was so fascinated that I went on – I copied the dictionary's next page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding

page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. [...]

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, [...] I [became] truly free in my life. (175 – 176)

Malcolm X's experience and achievements demonstrate the importance of words and their meanings and demonstrate the heights which command of language bestows on the individual. Language equals freedom. It is experience worth emulating.

At the writing workshop, training was restricted to poetry and the short story. Drama which has customarily been a part of this festival had been dropped. No explanations were given. We began to wonder whether this was an attempt at censorship on the part of the Ministry/government. Even where plays are not read, the theatre establishes an immediate action and reaction between the audience and the story enacted. A repressive government would not welcome satirical pieces aimed at ridiculing its ineffectiveness and failures among other things. Such governments have been known not only to put a ban on such plays but even to incarcerate the authors of these plays as obtained with Ngugi and the Kamiriithu group's staging of *I Will Marry When I Want* and Bate Besong and the Yaounde University Theatre troupe's staging of *Beasts of No Nation*. Language equals not freedom; Language equals imprisonment. The writer must always be aware of her audience and her purpose.

But getting back to the workshop, participants at this workshop from the six state universities had come to Buea and some for the very first time. Buea is the site of the volcanic Mount Cameroon. The University of Buea sits literally at the foot of the mountain. Living in Buea and having grown up in Buea as well, the mountain has remained

an integral part of my life. Classified previously as dormant, it remained so for the longest time and its presence did not impinge on my life until the 90s when it defied history and once more started to erupt. I began to see the mountain through other lenses as a lady who hides and reveals her majesty as she strips and teases with her clouds in an endless dance of seduction.

If experience is the bedrock of all knowledge, practice and more practice is central to the writing experience. We have been as eclectic as possible in our selection of writers who themselves are influenced by varied backgrounds such as Okigbo and the classics and p'Bitek and oral tradition. We have not been exhaustive but we hope that we have laid down the rudimentary rules and techniques necessary for all budding creative writers to keep in mind. Aristotle postulated that all art is imitation and the more recent example of American colonial Literature with heavy reliance on imitations of English Literature before it could carve out its own distinctive character bears this out. We hope that through imitation you will subsequently find your own voice. We dare to hope that this handbook will help the aspiring writer to use metaphor, allusion and imagery etc. to see through many lenses so that she too can as Ngugi advocates "sing a new song."

Roselyne M. Jua

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Teaching of Creative Writing

Ayi Kwei Armah

Is Creative writing teachable? More specifically, is it possible to teach people to write fiction, poetry and drama, or, since we're in the last stretch of the 20th century, film and television feature scripts?

The answer seems hyaline clear: yes. But a surprisingly large number of persons, including some writers, still hold the opposite view. One can understand why writers might be tempted to push the view that writers are born, not made; that high skill in verbal communication can only be innate, not acquired. The notion is flattering. It sets writers apart as intellectual elite of gifted people, a company of geniuses with admission standards so exclusive that only birth counts. A club like Mensa, at a more mysterious level of prestige.

In a profession with too few pleasant illusions left, it would be nice if this comforting myth were true. Unfortunately – and I hope my sister and brother writers will forgive my blowing our game – it is based on an almost total ignorance of the creative process.

Writers have often learned their craft through a combination of selective reading and trial-and-error practice. Formal instruction simply rationalizes and accelerates this education. No one denies that it is possible to become a writer through a time-consuming process of informal training. But that is no argument against the efficiency or the desirability of formal instruction.

Curiously, the same people who think Creative Writing is unteachable are comfortable with the knowledge that expository writing is teachable. That kind of teaching, in the form of composition exercises, starts quite early in the formal education system.

Composition exercises are designed to develop in learners the ability to observe reality, to think about it, to integrate other people's ideas into their own thinking, and to express their resultant views as effectively and stylishly as possible. They sharpen skills in the treatment of themes, narrative, description, argument. They teach the manipulation of symbols and images, as well as the smooth handling of diction and the technical niceties known as transitions, which enable us to shift from narrative to description, for instance, with no awkward stumbling.

The formal study of Creative Writing raises all these basic communication skills to higher levels, adding expertise in such specific craft techniques as dialogue, points of view and verisimilitude. But what of that notorious hurdle: inspiration?

Inspiration has come to have the magic force of an occult incantatory word. Sometimes those opposed to the teaching of Creative Writing use a syllogistic argument based on the following premises: creativity depends on inspiration; inspiration can't be taught. Therefore...

The argument looks strong until we take a look at the key term, inspiration. It so happens that the senile notion that inspiration comes naturally, out of the blue, is merely a piece of religious nonsense.

Inspiration can indeed strike with apparent suddenness, but a far more important detail is that it only comes to minds long and carefully prepared to receive it. In other words, a prime requisite for inspired creativity is the cultivation of purposeful persistent thinking habits. The root of inspiration isn't luck or the accident of birth. It's work – stubborn, systematic work. And far from coming from the sky, inspiration comes from deep within the well-stocked human mind itself.

Expository skills are of course fine and necessary. But when exclusively cultivated they might tend to orient us rather heavily towards things the way they are. One of the virtues of Creative Writing is that apart from letting us see

the way things happen to be now, it also opens our vision to the way things were in the past, and the way they might be in the future. In fact, at its best, Creative Writing engages the reader in a constant interactive process between the past, the present and the future, calculated to make educated persons not passive endurers of present conditions, but active protagonists aware of past causes and willing to use their awareness to help shape future results.

That being the case, the work of creative writers is socially necessary, and a society that makes no arrangements to educate its own creative writers, condemns itself to consume the literatures of alien societies as its spiritual staple diet. Such a society doesn't create and recreate its own values. It is content to borrow those of other societies. Like all borrowers in a merciless world, it ends up paying high interest rates and exorbitant loan service charges in the cultural form of irrational consumer habits and suicidal behaviour patterns.

Even when the necessity of Creative Writing is recognized, and the problem of the availability of competent teachers solved, African attitudes to Creative Writing may still be complicated by two assumptions still held sacred by shaky intellectuals not yet out of the colonial and neocolonial woods. The first assumption is that literacy itself is something alien to the African spirit, a phenomenon never known here but for the colonial invader. The twin assumption is that Africa never had a tradition of teaching writing, anyway.

Whisper it gently, but the good news is that both assumptions are false. Historical research findings, available and accessible, make it plain that the world's pioneers in the development of writing, in both its hieroglyphic and alphabetic forms, not only lived in Africa but were Africans, writing an African Language. They called themselves *Kamman*, among other names, and they called their literature *Kamit*. The two words are significant pointers to their African identity.

A reading of their literature offers solid proof that the characteristic themes, images and techniques of African Literature, written as well as oral, go back several thousand years in our history.

No doubt the neophyte African writer needs to know what, among a growing body of scholars, Professors Cheikh Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga have been patiently explaining for some time now: Literacy is an old African achievement. Like so much else in our legacy of material and intellectual resources, it's long been lost to us, partly because our ancient rulers, knowing it was power, and unwilling to share it, kept it jealously out of the people's reach.

The recovery of literacy, even under alien disguises, far from embarrassing us, might stimulate us into a better understanding of treasures lost through social stupidity, and a better use thereof, in the future we still have a chance to make.

As far as the technical aspects of the teaching of Creative Writing here in Africa are concerned, it might be useful to move backward in history, and take out initial bearings from the training of such analogous traditional verbal artists as the West African *griot* or the South African *imbongi*. These artists normally underwent formal training, sometimes of a truly elaborate kind. A master griot, for instance, might have 42 seasons of formal training and practice behind him, symbolized by the number of strings on the great Kora.

Such information about the oral tradition in Africa is relatively well known, even if still inadequately popularized. What is not so well known is that Africa has a written literature that antedates the usual lore presented at conferences on oral traditions. That literature (*Kami*) in fact recognizes oral performance not as something divorced from written literature, but as a natural complement. "By day write with your fingers; recite by night." That's the balanced advice of the writing teacher in the text known as the Papyrus Lansing.

That text, incidentally, is far from dull. With ruthless humour it details the disadvantages of such professions as farming and army life as compared with the writer's work. The same advertisement for the writer's craft is hammered home in the Papyrus Chester Beatty IV:

Man decays, his corpse is dust.
All his kin have perished;
But a book makes him remembered
Through the mouth of its reciter.
Better is a book than a well-built house,
Than tomb-chapels in the west;
Better than a solid mansion,
Than a stela in the temple!

After which the writer proceeds to name a few of the greatest of ancient Egyptian writers.

Such is the cultural value of translation that even if you can't write your name in hieroglyphics you still have access to the relevant texts. A commendable anthology is Miriam Lichtheim's three-volume set, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. The quotations here are from Volume II of that set.

Whether they're interested in hieroglyphic texts or secondary translations, Africa's aspiring creative writers can take heart. The craft is teachable, and Africans who practise it, appearances notwithstanding, stand on ancestral ground. As to material incentives ... but that's another story.

Literature in the Season of the Diaspora: Notes to the Anglophone Cameroonian Writer

Bate Besong*

Of Pariahs and Masons

Many of the leading cultural figures of their time, in all climates, have maintained the artist's traditional responsibility in addressing the question of meaning, in endeavouring to synthesize, in seeking to weld disparate fragments into a coherent reality. And, in times like these...

The yeast of history, above all, as a creative resource can never be far from the troubadour's mind. A writer who has no sense of history is like a sparrow without wings, for the writer must be the visionary of living truth.

In fact, a writer without a sense of history is the Aesopian lion devoid of claws and teeth. Today, one hundred and fifty-one years after his death in 1832, we are meeting at the Goethe Institute, in Yaounde, to talk about how our work, as chief banner bearers of our people, can become relevant; we are here to talk about how our roles as spokesmen of our people can be read and appreciated by those moved by their themes of thwarted hopes. We are here for a collective catharsis.

Goethe spent the period 1770-2 at the famous University of Strassbourg. Here, the young man fell under the influence of Professor Herder who persuaded him to drop his plan to write in the French language. Could it then be reasoned that Goethe, a giant of world literature, would have died in anonymity had he abandoned his native language for the romantic moonshine of Parisian cafe's and saloons?

May the vision of Wolfgang Goethe guide us here today.

* Winner of the 1992 A.N.A. Literature (Drama) Award

An Ambushed Homecoming?

We are in affinity with the supreme colossus of the Harlem Renaissance, Dr. William Bughart du Bois. As W.E.B., said of the colour problem in the U.S.A., the Anglophone Cameroonian's very existence is the burning question of today.

Consider: After the lunatic route we took on Foumban, as in a Dantean Inferno, the Anglophone Cameroonian occupies the centre of Hell.

The surrounding concentric rings of this smouldering infernal canyon may embrace a multitude of other victims in the present Cameroonian reality, but there is no doubt that our people, subjected to perpetual mental and psychological servitude, are the story book victims of a cultural holocaust.

History has – since the biblical Cain and Abel – carved no grimmer monuments to its own propensity for unfathomable cynicism and evil.

Before we go, before we zoom off into the best-cushioned retirement in the haven of an anachronistic aesthetic – whose accoutrements are slavish metaphors, or literary bondage, whose by-products abound with mystical and decadent overtones. Or, like some of us have recently done: withdraw, into a life of ascetic contemplation in search of masturbatory succour by resorting, ostrich-like, to the tradition of popular balladry.

Fellow writers, before we zoom off into the best-cushioned limbo of art-for-art's-sake, a pause, please, to look at some of what three decades of re-unification has wrought for us: feudal oppression, mountains of suspicion and hate, retrogression, post-Foumban pauperization, resentment. Indeed, we bear the scars of "brotherhood."

The gangrene-filled labyrinth of chaos that is *Pax Cameroona* today has put an end to our self-acclaimed title as the invincible super-heavyweight hey! hey! big-boss of the "new deal" world.

Since we are an inter-galactic nation, since we are situated somewhere between the planets Uranus and Neptune and, therefore, out of the Earth, we might have maintained our mystique if pampered locusts had not suddenly preyed over the national treasury. In fact, we might have maintained our mystique by avoiding the last eccentric presidential elections (we did call it a renaissance of democra-zy in this part of Africa, and so we had nothing to learn from Democracy – with a capital D!).

Alas! Good-bye to the last of our hurrahs!

The landscape of the past three decades has ruthlessly shown up all our political and economic illusions under the guise “of the bi-cultural character of the two unifying parts;” thus, graphically lending expression to the existentialist predicament of the Anglophone Cameroonian caught in the terrifying coils of a world beyond his comprehension.

We are in the season of harrowing self-analysis. We are the products of an age of profound discontent. We are an embattled people under the cancerous embrace of “national integration,” fighting against titanic odds.

We are the biblical children of Ham, profoundly affected by cataclysmic changes and traumas which seem to toss us about like an Eliotan rag doll; hollow men, without speech; caught in the broken jaw, in the lost kingdom “of the prickly ... prickly pear” at “5 o’clock in the morning” sprawled in the tumid river. Alas!

And, yet, there was a time when people had faith, implicit faith – in this Union – without making any investigations!

But I ask you, where is that faith now? It has vanished. So utterly! The bonds have snapped. We carry the scars of “brotherhood” in a country so unaccustomed to candour. The literature of a people is the mirror of that community. One cannot live in society and be free from that society. Calm yourselves, Your Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, fellow writers ... The literature of an embattled

people must be the mirror of that society but, tell me: could a mirror which does not reflect things correctly be called a mirror?

The creative writer, in many ways, is an intellectual concerned with discovering the truth. His protean curiosity covers many fields of learning and knowledge. He is, of course, free to say and write what he likes without any restrictions.

There certainly is nothing wrong with providing all things and finding out the truth of a matter. And one, according to Vladimir Illyich Lenin, “needs to be sure of the foundations” of his “... creative itinerary ...,” “of the basis for the facts he learns in life.” But if he is to be the salt of the earth, if he is to be the spice in a fragmented and spiritually rudderless society, if he is to become the leaven in a lump of dough infusing the Promethean muses’ glory in a society influenced and controlled by the Mephistophelean forces of Demogorgon – as the penetrating and relentless analyzer of Cameroon society and social realities – his, the Anglophone Cameroon writer’s questing mind that is, should be concerned with principles, purposes and the essence of things, rather than with mere appearances, rather than with mere workings.

The elysian-bred optimist may think the Anglophone Cameroon Question might be quickly resolved. That is far too blithe. The agony of the Anglophone Cameroon Question is compounded by the endless uncertainty as to whether there would ever be an end to it. Writers are inspired by the adversity of their day. So must we.

There could be no better test. There can be no better way of quantifying such human suffering. Could we draw from the memorable lines of the Jamaican-born African-American poet Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” to provide succour? Perhaps, a word of caution is still necessary.

Far be it from[sic] us to advocate any kind of monolithic, post-1992 one party national-assembly kind of literature; far be it from us to advocate a solution by means of a few key-note-decrees which, in the end, become as grotesque and laughable as that itinerant prophet who, having found the alchemist stone of literature, prescribed new *nostrums* for the immortality of national unity – By Decree! ... Don't laugh ...

No one can speak for us. Only those who daily live through the humiliations, the third-class citizenship, in the abattoir of servitude, only we can fully comprehend and explore these contradictions in a society undergoing such rapid and confusing transition.

Anglophone Cameroon Literature cannot make a single step forward until it understands – please note – the dubious and fragile environment that is National Unity, now: like the skull of some pre-historic brontosaurus, it has, in the last decade especially, become the Lake Nyos bomb of history, looming over the incubator of a poisonous brand of “national integration.”

The writer must be in the pull of action. To arouse his Anglophone Cameroonian constituency from the apathy and despair into which it has sunk, the writer's *métier* must be transformed into hand grenades in his literary arsenal for venting his crusading spirit. He will fail most woefully, ostracized from his roots, as it were, if he tries to write in a style that is alien to him; very much – indeed – like that accursed man in Achebeiana who left his burning house to pursue a fleeing rat (Aeschylusan plots, Wordsworthian themes)!

True, the power of the writer is not always strong enough to change the political and social situation of his time but his art can become a fighting literature, he can write works which are artistically profound and politically correct: he can write works of indictment and works that show how his world is and could be.

Time for the Creative Boom

The Anglophone Cameroonian Writer must never forget his origins. His writing must depict the conditions of his people, expressing their spontaneous feelings of betrayal, protest and anger.

It must challenge. It must indict head on. His writing must open up the Chinese Wall of Opportunity, closed to his people for over three decades.

Our literature must convey with remarkable force the moods of the Anglophone Cameroonian caught in the assimilation-nightmare of Sisyphean existence.

That literature must be inspired by an historical myth-informed consciousness. It must embody in bold relief the specific historical features of the entire Cameroonian reality. We must not evade the issues raised by economic, social and political change.

We will be criticized, of course, for our attempt to be honest in treating these questions and in recognizing the frustration and agony of a people held as a hostage minority. But we must insist on the truth of what we write.

The Anglophone Cameroonian writer at home and in the diaspora must tell the outside world the story of his tragic land from the point of view of its hostage minority.

And, such a literature, fellow writers, can only be written by you: Anglophone Cameroonian writers, in the Anglophone Cameroonian language and on Anglophone Cameroonian subjects.

The Writer in a Changing Society¹

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

A writer responds, with his total personality, to a social environment, which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. Thus the same writer will produce different types of work, sometimes contradictory in mood, sentiment, degree of optimism and even world-view. For the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by, history.

We can see this in the work of the Malawian poet and novelist, David Rubadiri. In 1952 he wrote his famous poem *Stanley Meets Mutesa*, in which he painted a picture of the fatal encounter between Africa and Europe and captured the mood of a continent. For this was a dominant theme in African writing. The period was also one of Africa's cultural and political assertions. Fourteen years later he was to write a novel, *No Bride Price*, which showed his distaste with the post-Independence era in Africa: the leaders of the anti-colonial struggle have become traitors to their peoples' cause and have sacrificed Africa on the altar of their own middle-class comfort. The disillusionment with the ruling elite is to be found in the recent works of most African writers: Okot p'Bitek, Leonard Kibera, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, to mention only a few. All of them are reacting to a situation very different from the one prevailing in the fifties.

I too must have changed since I started writing in 1960.

I was then a student at Makerere University College. I remember sending a shy little note to the Warden of my then Hall of Residence saying I wanted to be a writer. No doubt the note was a little hasty and rather self-conscious,

1. Speech delivered to Makerere Extra-mural students at Jinja, Uganda, October, 1969.

because I had not then written anything. I had read a number of writers, African and West Indian, and I knew that what they told, the song they sang, was different from what I had heard from the British writers who had been crammed down my throat in schools and at the University. The African writers spoke to me, they spoke about my situation. What was my situation?

I grew up in a small village. My father with his four wives had no land. They lived as tenants-at-will on somebody else's land. Harvests were often poor. Sweetened tea with milk at any time of day was a luxury. We had one meal a day – late in the evening. Every day the women would go to their scruffy little strips of shamba. But they had faith and they waited.

Just opposite the ridge on which our village was scattered were the sprawling green fields owned by the white settlers. They grew coffee and tea and pyrethrum. I worked there sometimes, digging the ground, tending the settlers' crops, and this for less than ten shillings. Every morning African workers would stream across the valley to sell their sweat for such a meagre sum of money, and at the end of the week or month they would give it all to the Indian trader who owned most of the shops in our area for a pound of sugar, maize flour, or grains, thankful that this would silence the children's clamour for a few days. These workers were the creators of wealth but they never benefited from it: the products of their collective sweat went to feed and clothe the children of the Indian trader, and those of the European settlers not only in our country but even those in England. I was living in a village and also in a colonial situation.

One day I heard a song. I remember the scene so vividly: the women who sang it are now before me – their sad faces and their plaintive melody. I was then ten or eleven. They were being forcibly ejected from the land they occupied and sent to another part of the country so barren that people called it the land of black rocks. This was the gist of their song:

And there will be great great joy
When our land comes back to us
For Kenya is the country of black people.

And you our children
Tighten belts around your waist
So you will one day drive away from this land
The race of white people
For truly, Kenya is a black man's country.

They were in a convoy of lorries, caged, but they had one voice. They sang of a common loss and hope and I felt their voice rock the earth where I stood literally unable to move.

Their words were not the platitudes of our university philosophers who use words as shields from life and truth: these women had lived the words they spoke. There was at once a fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable and also a collective defiance. 'We shall overcome', they seemed to say. The women had taken a correct political stand in the face of an oppressive enemy.

In 1923 such a stand had cost the lives of twenty-three people in Nairobi when men and women collected and demanded the release of their leaders. That stand also cost the lives of our early heroes of resistance, like the Laibon of the Kalenjin people, who led a violent peasant resistance against the early British occupation. In 1952 that dogged collective resistance caused Kenyans even more lives; the peasants had taken to the forest to defend their lives and property and for four years were able to withstand the military might of British imperialism.

That song I heard as a child then spoke of things past and things to come. I was living in a colonial situation but I did not know it. Not even when I went to school. I went to a missionary school where we were told over and over again that we were potential leaders of our people. We were being

trained to be good responsible leaders. Education was not aimed at knowledge of self and the reality of the black man's place in the world. What we did not know was that we were being groomed to become a buffer state between the propertied white rulers and the harsh realities under which the African peasants and workers lived. The idea was something like this. They, the African workers and peasants, would see their selected few brothers and sisters living in relative comfort and fraternizing with whites and they would be contented: they would have a we-have-almost-arrived kind of attitude – 'we are getting equality bit by bit.' Our schools and universities – I am not sure if they have changed much – were monuments of lies and half-truths. That which was most admired was a search for truth, meaning a life devoted to the truth that only rationalized the status quo, that conferred on nationally stolen property – stolen that is from the masses – the aura of sanctity. While we were at our bourgeois schools and universities searching for that truth in books written for us by our imperial conquerors, the peasant masses, those women I once heard sing, had collectively rejected the white seizure of the land.

It was they who fought for Uhuru. It was the united strength of the peasants and workers that made British imperialists retreat, even though they later returned through the back door.

What have these peasants gained from Uhuru? Has our ruling elite tried to change the colonial social and economic structure? Are the peasants and workers in control of the land they fought for?

When I look around me, I see sad faces; I see unfulfilled hope and promise. We who went to schools and colleges and had regular salaries were quickly able to buy positions among the middle classes. With our cars, lands, and mansions, we forget that we are only joining our European and Asian counterparts in living on the sweat of millions.

We entered the race to fill some of the vacant places, silencing protest by assuring our followers that we were only getting the national cake – for the tribe. Even the pretence of a national ideal has been abandoned by the ruling elite. When hungry, unsatisfied voices clamour around us we only say: ‘Hush! You might ruin our tribal chances of a bigger share in the national cake.’

The Biafran-Nigerian conflict, where ordinary men and women who had not in any case gained much from Uhuru were made to slaughter one another, with guns supplied by competing Western powers who had for centuries ravished the continent, is today’s African reality: the potential of a Biafran type of conflict exists in every African country that has doggedly refused to dismantle capitalism and colonial economic structures, to correct the legacy of an uneven geographic and social development.

I believe that African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organization that will free the manacled spirit and energy of our people so we can build a new country, and sing a new song. Perhaps, in a small way, the African writer can help in articulating the feelings behind this struggle.

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“Reading this handbook, practising writers will gain in confidence as they rationalize their craft, while beginning writers will learn a great deal, from the useful tips, to write better. The book contains, among other things, a beautiful foreword. Two enlightening essays on the responsibility of the writer in society and an excellent one on the teachability of creative writing conclude the text. A rare category in African literature, this important handbook will be useful not only to writers but to both students and teachers of African literature.”

Shadrach A. Ambanasom, Associate Professor of Literature, University of Yaoundé I (ENS Bambili), Cameroon

“This is a significant contribution that will benefit young writers striving towards creativity; it will help them to begin understanding this sometimes elusive and equally challenging process. The authors have done a remarkable job appraising the works of select authors in different genres in an effort to buttress their goal of demystifying the creative process to young writers.”

Emmanuel Fru Doh, Century College, Minnesota, USA

To the Budding Creative Writer: A Handbook is designed to help young writers come to grips with questions and problems relative to their creative efforts. The authors discuss a range of topics, providing guidelines on such issues as style, technique, point of view, characterization, poetic diction, figurative language, denotation and connotation, etc. They equally offer useful critical comments on some of the works of accomplished African writers whom they cite as models for beginning writers, fusing literary creativity with literary criticism. All along the co-authors stress the centrality, in imaginative writing, of both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ or matter and manner, and how to combine both to good effect.

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